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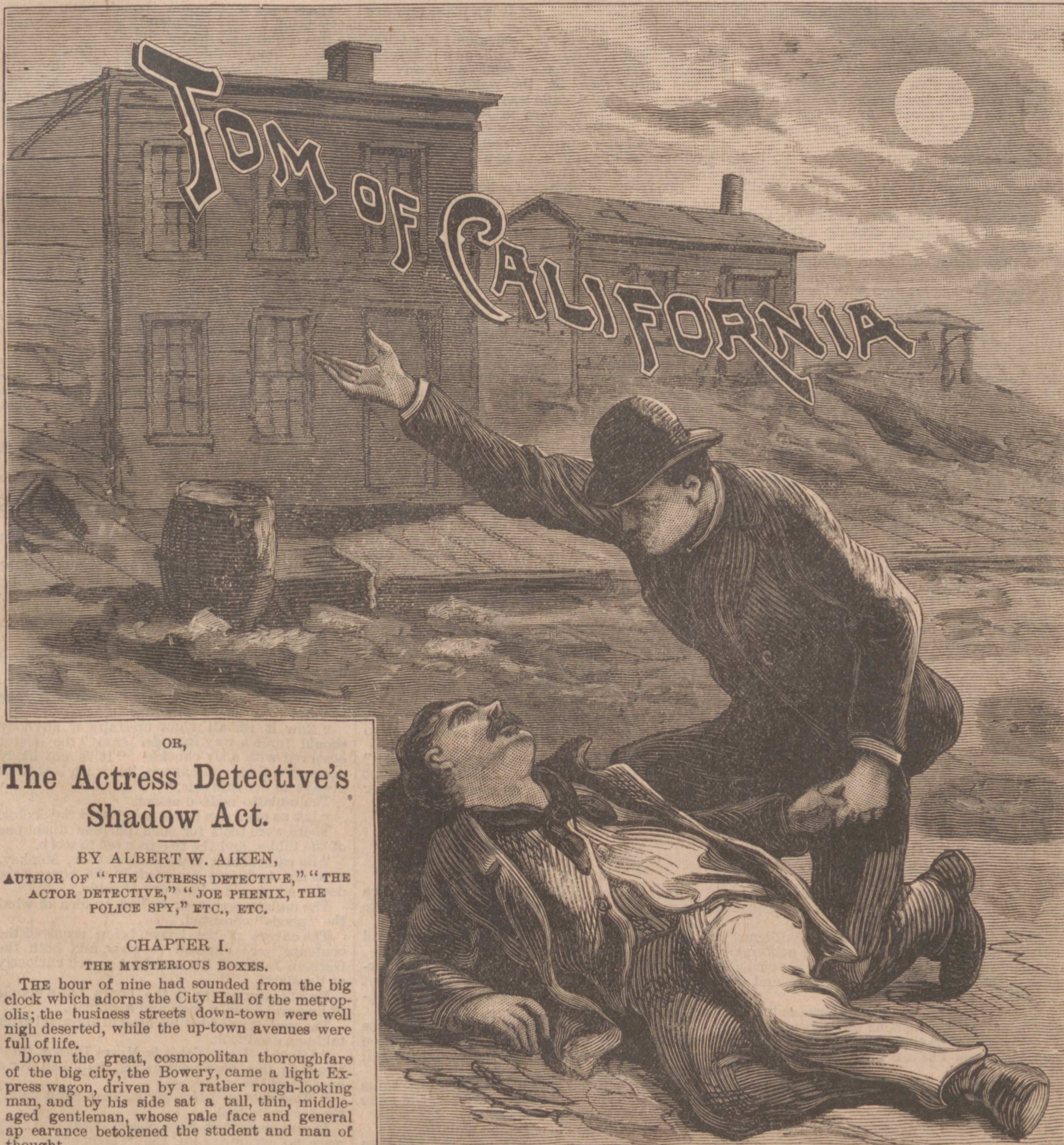
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OR,

The Actress Detective's Shadow Act.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,

AUTHOR OF "THE ACTRESS DETECTIVE," "THE
ACTOR DETECTIVE," "JOE PHENIX, THE
POLICE SPY," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE MYSTERIOUS BOXES.

THE hour of nine had sounded from the big clock which adorns the City Hall of the metropolis; the business streets down-town were well nigh deserted, while the up-town avenues were full of life.

Down the great, cosmopolitan thoroughfare of the big city, the Bowery, came a light Express wagon, driven by a rather rough-looking man, and by his side sat a tall, thin, middle-aged gentleman, whose pale face and general appearance betokened the student and man of thought.

In the wagon were two long boxes, rudely constructed out of common pine boards, which

"I SWEAR BY ALL I HOLD SACRED TO BRING TO JUSTICE EACH AND EVERY MEMBER OF THE INVISIBLE HAND BAND!" SAID TOM OF CALIFORNIA SOLEMNLY.

were about two feet wide and deep by six feet long.

Down the Bowery to Chatham Square went the wagon, and then turned off into the New Bowery, through which the wagon proceeded until it came to the point where Pearl street and three or four minor thoroughfares seemed to get all tangled up.

This peculiar condition of affairs comes because in the old time there was no New Bowery, nor New Chambers street, only the little narrow lanes, hardly worthy to be called streets.

The cutting through of the broad avenues played havoc with these little streets.

Into one of them—a vile, unsavory lane running from the waterside to Pearl street, and filled with low sailor saloons, boarding-houses and a few disreputable-looking stores—the Express wagon turned.

It came to a halt before the door of one of the dingiest shops in the street, and that was saying a deal, for there was not a decent-looking store or house in the block.

The shop was an old one, and would have attracted attention in any locality.

The panes of glass of its small show window apparently had not been washed for an age, and were so begrimed with dust that it was a difficult matter for any one to look through them and see what was within.

There wasn't anything in the show-window, though, to excite attention or curiosity, and few people ever took the trouble to cast a second glance at it, the window being arrayed with big bunches of dried herbs and a few dilapidated specimens of the taxidermist's art.

A sign over the door, the letters of which had become so blurred that they could scarcely be distinguished, bore the inscription:

"LENICAS ZIMMER,
Botanical Doctor."

And a small tin sign in the window bore the announcement that the doctor was also a taxidermist, and was prepared to "mount and prepare" all sorts of specimens upon reasonable terms and in a first-class manner.

In person, Doctor Zimmer was a tall, lean, German Jew with a hatchet-like face, high cheekbones, across which his yellow, parchment-like skin was tightly drawn.

He was a man well in years, and altogether in his rusty suit of black, wearing a frock coat with tails so long that they came nearly to the ground, presented a weird and uncanny appearance.

He was not a popular man with his neighbors, although his skill as a doctor was acknowledged to be great, and the police of the district kept their eyes upon him, for they had a suspicion that the doctor would not hesitate to turn a penny in an unlawful way if he had a chance.

No "copper" had yet been smart enough to catch the doctor in any illegal act though, and he was as bland and soft to the policemen and detectives as though he considered them to be the greatest friends he had in the world.

Before the door of Doctor Zimmer's shop the Express wagon stopped.

There was no light in the place, nor any signs of life about the establishment, but the wagon was evidently expected, for the moment it halted the doctor made his appearance in the doorway of the shop.

There was a gas-light some ten houses away, and although, like everything else in the street, it seemed to be dull and discouraged, yet it afforded light enough for the doctor and the men in the Express wagon to see what they were about.

"Ish it all right, my tears?" the old Jew asked in his soft, insinuating way.

"Oh, yes, as right as ninnence, do ye mind!" replied the tall, thin man, speaking with a decided burr, and a man versed in nationalities would have at once set him down for a Scotchman.

And this judgment would have been correct, for the speaker was named Rodney MacNabb.

He was a lawyer, and had a fair practice, chiefly criminal cases, and was looked upon as a sharp, unscrupulous man.

As the pair descended to the street and began to haul out one of the long boxes, a policeman made his appearance. He had been standing in a doorway down the street, and now came lounging along, curious to ascertain what was going on.

"Hello! phat is up?" asked the policeman, his decided brogue showing that he was a transplant from the sweet Emerald Isle.

"Ah, is dot you, my tear Mister O'Skilligan?" quoth the doctor as the red-whiskered policeman sauntered up to the wagon and cast a curious glance at the long box which MacNabb and the driver were hauling out.

"Yis, sur, it is me, meself, as large as life and twice as natural," responded the officer. "Phat do yees be afther having in this box? Upon me wourd! it looks like a coffin. Phat have yees got in it?"

"A stiff," responded MacNabb in such a deep, guttural tone, a regular ghost-like voice, that the officer fairly started.

"Phat is it that ye're afther givin' me?" he exclaimed. And then, taking a good look at the speaker he recognized the lawyer.

"Oho! is it there ye are, Mister MacNabb?" he cried. "Divil burn ye! but I might have known that it was yees, for yees are always up to some fool joke; an' so it is a stiff that we have in the box?"

"Yes, and there is a pair of them; there is another box in the wagon. Better rap for assistance, man; two stiff's will be more than a match for one Irishman!" the lawyer remarked.

"Aisy now wid yer jokin'!" the policeman cried. "Upon me wourd though it does look as if you had a stiff in the box."

"Yesh, yesh; dey ish stiff's, sure enough!" the doctor chuckled. "Mine tear frient, dey was two alligators from Florida, dot hafe been brought to me to be stuffed."

"Don't ye believe him!" the lawyer exclaimed. "He is trying to stuff you and not the alligators, O'Skilligan. Better call for assistance and have the boxes opened."

"Go 'long wid your foolin'!" the officer responded.

By this time the pair had got the box half-way out of the wagon so that one end rested on the pavement.

There was an inscription on the box and by the aid of the dim light of the gas-lamp the policeman was able to make it out.

"Judge Conrad Blitzenheimer, New York, per steamer, City of Charleston. Handle carefully," said the policeman reading aloud the inscription inscribed upon the box.

"Oho! it's the judge's alligators!" he exclaimed. "Shure! I was afther readin' in the mornin' paper that the big Dutch judge was down in Florida shootin' lashin's of alligators!"

"Don't you believe it, mon!" cried the sharp voice of the Scotchman. "It is a plant they are putting up on ye!"

"Ah! go 'long wid ye!" exclaimed the Irishman. "Shure, you're the divil's own boy for a joke!" And the policeman went on his way.

The three men by the wagon exchanged glances and a quiet smile was on each face.

"I was afraid we were in for it," MacNabb remarked. "The fellow was evidently hiding in some doorway down the street, or else I would have noticed him, for I took a careful glance around before we halted."

"Dot Irishman ish a fool policeman und does not know enough to go in when it rains!" the doctor remarked in a tone full of contempt. "But come, let us hurry up and get der boxes inter der house before some odder copper comes dis way. We might not be able to pull der wool over der eyes of annodder man so easily."

"That is true enough," the lawyer assented.

Into the house then the boxes were hurried with all possible dispatch, and then the two resumed their places in the Express wagon and drove away.

After the wagon departed the Jew secured his door with locks and bars, which were strong enough to resist a severe attack, and then called up his assistant, who was enjoying a nap in a rude sort of bunk under the counter.

The assistant was as great a character in his way as the doctor was in his.

He was a mulatto, a regular "cream-colored negro," undersized and misshapen, for he was a hunchback, but possessed of wonderful strength.

His face was surly and animal-like, the under jaw as massive as that of a baboon; in fact, his whole face bore such a resemblance to that of an ape that he had acquired the title of Monkey Bill, and no one who knew him ever thought of calling him by any other name.

And it did not displease the mulatto either, for by one of those odd fancies peculiar to the human mind he was proud of his resemblance to an ape, and rather gloried in the fact that his arms were so long that he was able to scratch his ankles without stooping.

After closing and securing the door the doctor carefully drew the curtain down so as to keep the rays of the dim coal oil lamp, that was burning upon the counter, from penetrating to the street.

"Now, Monkey, gife me a hand wid de boxes," the old Jew said, when his brute-like assistant made his appearance from under the counter rubbing his eyes.

The mulatto hastened to comply.

CHAPTER II.

BACK TO LIFE.

THE store was a small one, not over twelve feet square, and in the rear was a room where the old Jew had his office.

The house was a small two-storied one and the doctor rented the entire building.

The rooms above the store were plainly furnished and there the doctor and his assistant lived, and, once in a while, a patient was received as a boarder.

There were no servants in the house, the mulatto, whose original occupation had been that of a cook on board ship, attending to all domestic duties.

"Mine gootness! when dot Irishman came sneaking around it brought my heart in mine mouth," the doctor announced.

"W'at Irishman?" asked the mulatto.

"Oh, I forgot dot you vas not dere," and then the doctor related the policeman episode.

Monkey Bill scowled and showed his teeth in an animal-like fashion.

"Dat red-headed Irisher is too fresh," he remarked. "Somebody will have to hit him in de head wid a brick one ob dese nights, jes' for to teach him to mind his own business."

"Yesh, yesh, he t'inks he knows a lot, but he ish not one-half as smart as he believes," the doctor observed. "Gife me a hand wid der boxes and we will get them into der cellar."

"Which one—de furst or second?"

"Der second, for these are specimens, Monkey, and I hafe work to do mit them."

"Oh, yes, and dat was de reason you didn't want de cop to catch on," the mulatto remarked, with a knowing grin.

"Yesh, all de fat wourd hafe been in de fire then for certain."

On the side of the room opposite to where the counter stood was an old-fashioned fireplace.

The boxes were placed within this fireplace, and then the doctor touched a secret spring in the woodwork, under the mantel-piece; a section of the flooring upon which the boxes stood, about two feet wide by six long, sunk out of sight carrying the boxes down to the underground regions with it.

It was a trap-door arranged elevator fashion and worked with the noiseless precision of well-oiled machinery.

Then the doctor took the lamp from the counter and, followed by the mulatto, proceeded to the cellar.

It was a plain, ordinary underground apartment in which the two found themselves, and in it was no trace of the elevator which had taken away the boxes.

There was a chimney though, built of old-style brick which had plainly never been made in this country, so quaint and odd were they.

This chimney was a massive affair, but evidently hollow, the elevator working within it.

The doctor approached the side of the chimney, pressed his thumb upon a certain spot and a small door opened, and this relic of the ancient days, when very old castles boasted of such contrivances, was so cunningly arranged that the most careful examination of the bricks when the door was closed, would not have revealed that anything was wrong.

The door being open, a narrow stairway, leading downward, was revealed.

The doctor descended, the mulatto followed, and when the doctor was half-way down the narrow iron staircase, the pressure of his weight upon a certain stair caused the door in the chimney to close again.

This was a trap designed to catch any intruder that should manage to discover the secret of the door, and attempt to solve the mystery of the hidden apartment.

By descending the stairs the spy would cause the door to close, and if he was not able to discover the secret spring, by means of which the portal could be opened, a lingering death would be his doom.

The secret cellar was directly under the real one; a damp, unwholesome place with the smell of a charnel house.

There were a couple of rude tables and some stools, the tables being merely four boards, cleated together and laid on benches formed like carpenter's saw-horses.

By the side of the wall was the elevator with the boxes on it.

The first thing that the doctor did was to light a lantern which was suspended from the ceiling of the cellar directly over the tables, which were placed side by side in the center of the room.

The lantern was arranged with a reflector so as to cast a strong light upon the tables.

"Now, Monkey, help me to put der boxes on der tables," the doctor said.

This was soon accomplished, and then the doctor touched a spring in the wall which caused the elevator to ascend again.

"Now it ish all right up-stairs if anybody should force a way into der store," the doctor observed with a sly chuckle. "It is not likely dot such a t'ing will happen, but it ish best to be always on der safe side."

The mulatto nodded assent.

"Let us open der boxes now," said the doctor. There were tools for such purpose upon one of the tables, and the two men set to work.

"Be careful how you handle de tools, Monkey, so as not to injure der goods in the boxes," the doctor continued with a dry chuckle.

The mulatto grinned; he had an idea of what the "goods" consisted.

The covers of the boxes being removed the contents were exposed to view, and both the German Jew and his assistant peered curiously at the sight.

No alligators were in the boxes but a couple of human bodies, a man and a woman.

The mulatto nodded his head in approval after taking a good look.

"I done tell you w'at it is, Massa Doctor, them two is as fine specimens as you hab had for a long time!" he exclaimed.

"Mine gootness, Monkey, you are right dere," the doctor replied.

It was plain from these observations that they were no strangers to the "body-snatching" business.

"Who is you gwine to sell dem to?" The doctor gave vent to one of his dry chuckles. "Aha, Monkey, you are out dis time," he remarked. "These two are not for sale."

"Dat's a pity, for dey would be sure to fetch a good price."

"Ah, yesh, but de operation dot I am going to perform on dem will bring more money ino mine pocket."

"You don't say so!" the mulatto exclaimed in wonder. "Why, Massa Doctor, w'ot is you gwine to do?"

"S'pose you wait awhile und you will see," the doctor replied in a mysterious way. "You t'ink dot dey are fine subjects, eh?"

"By golly! yes, Massa Doctor!" the mulatto declared. "Dey are as good ones as I ebber see'd."

"Now, Monkey, see v'at a mistake you hafe made!" the doctor exclaimed. "Dey are not subjects—dey are *not* dead!"

"W'at's, dat?" cried the assistant in vast astonishment. "Not dead."

"Dot ish v'at I said."

The mulatto peered into the box and made a searching examination, even going so far as to touch the faces with his fingers.

"Well Massa Doctor, you ought to know, ob course, but if dis yere gemman and lady ain't done gone and kicked de bucket, den I don't know nothing 'tall bout dead people, dat's all!"

"Monkey, my son, it ish plain to me dot you do not know as much about dead people as you t'ink you do," the old Jew remarked with a wise shake of the head.

"Mebbe not but if dey ain't dead w'at is de matter wid 'em?"

"They are in a trance, but I do not wonder dot you was deceived. Nine out of every ten doctors would be sure dot the two were dead, und if I did not know dot de pair were subject to dis sort of t'ing, mebbe, I would say dot dey was only fit to be buried too."

"I reckon dat you would, boss!" the mulatto exclaimed in a tone of conviction.

"Help me to lift dem out of de boxes," said the doctor.

The assistant complied.

The first that they removed was the woman, a handsome lady in the prime of life and arrayed in a costly black silk dress, but after she was deposited on the table and the box removed, the mulatto shook his head doubtfully as if he could not make up his mind that the breath of life was still in the apparently pulseless body.

And the man, a good-looking gentleman, attired in complete black, showed no signs of life.

"Hain't you made some mistake 'bout dis t'ing! Massa Doctor?" Monkey Bill asked.

"Oh, no!" the doctor asserted, positively.

"Both are still alive. But if they continued ten hours more in dis state, all der medicine and science in der world wouldn't do dem no good. It is not too late for me though to bring dem back to life."

Then the doctor took a vial of medicine from his pocket, also a syringe, and forced a small quantity of the liquid down the throats of the two.

Then, after waiting for about ten minutes, he applied a small galvanic battery to the man, the mulatto watching him open-mouthed.

Monkey Bill had seen his master perform some skillful operations before and had an idea that there wasn't much about the science of medicine which the doctor did not know, but this operation of literally "raising the dead," was something perfectly astounding to him.

The operation was a successful one.

In a few minutes the man showed signs of life, more natural color came into his face and he began to breathe heavily.

"Send down the elevator, take him up on it and put him in der front bedroom," the doctor commanded.

The mulatto obeyed.

When he returned, the doctor, by means of the galvanic battery, had succeeded in restoring the woman.

"Take her to der back bedroom!" the doctor commanded. "Did I not tell you I would do der trick?"

"By golly! Massa Doctor, I reckon you kin do anything arter this!" the mulatto declared.

A most desperate expedient had succeeded and the law had been baffled in a most wonderful manner.

CHAPTER III.

BIRDS OF PREY.

JUST a month after the time when the "Big Dutch Judge's alligators" were delivered to the German Jew doctor, a guest made his appearance at the Fifth Avenue Hotel who excited the curiosity of some parties who made it their business to closely scrutinize all well-dressed strangers.

This stranger was a young man, five and twenty or thereabouts, rather under the medium size, but apparently well-built, although his beardless face—he was smoothly shaven—gave him an effeminate look.

He was a good-looking young fellow, with regular features, light hair, which curled in little crispy ringlets over his well-shapen head; rather peculiar gray eyes and a careless, easy

way which seemed to say that he was on good terms with himself and all the world.

He had registered as Thomas Mackay, San Francisco, California; told the clerk that he wanted a good room, and no sky parlor, for he had been born tired and hated the trouble of going up-stairs, even in an elevator, and as the young man came accompanied by a big sole-leather trunk, which the experienced hotel clerk "sized up" to be worth at least fifty dollars of anybody's money, he was accommodated with a really excellent apartment.

That the stranger was no penniless adventurer was soon apparent, for having occasion to buy some postage-stamps he displayed a big roll of bills, which he carried, carelessly, in his upper vest-pocket in the good old, happy-go-lucky Californian style.

As we have said, there were a couple of loungers in the office of the hotel who took a decided interest in the stranger.

All the big New York hotels employ detectives whose business it is to watch the office, and the entrance thereto, in order to keep out disreputable characters.

These detectives are well acquainted with the class who lurk around hotels, and other places of public resort, for the purpose of preying upon innocent strangers.

The detectives are shrewd judges of human nature and often "pick up" a "crook," even when the man is unknown to them, from something peculiar in his manner.

But the detectives are only men, not magicians, and when they come in contact with a first-class man in the crooked line, they are no more able to discover his real character than a mere man of the world, who makes no pretensions to the possession of any detective skill.

And in the case of these two parties to whom we have referred, the hotel detective had no suspicion that there was anything wrong about them.

Both were foreigners, and strangers.

One was a tall, dark fellow with a distinguished bearing, a Louis Napoleon-like face, ornamented with a carefully waxed mustache and imperial; few who knew anything about nationalities would make the mistake of thinking he was anything but a Frenchman.

He answered to the name of Victor De Neville, and although he professed to be traveling "incog." in this country, yet it was well understood by those who had happened to make the acquaintance of the gentleman that in France he bore the title of marquis.

De Neville had only been in New York for about a month and had taken up his abode at a restaurant in the French quarter, kept by a gentleman who had once been a prominent man in Paris, but politics—he was a red republican—a communist—had caused him to flee from his native land.

His restaurant was a popular place with the French residents of the city, and was much frequented too by the young men about town, who were anxious to ape foreign manners; and from becoming acquainted with some of these New York bloods in the billiard-room the marquis owed his introduction into swell New York society.

His companion, who accompanied the marquis on this particular night when we introduce the pair to our reader's notice was a decided contrast to the Frenchman.

He was a typical Englishman, ruddy-faced, blonde-haired with mutton-chop whiskers, short in stature and thick-set.

He was a new addition to New York society.

Adolphus Fitzherbert he called himself, and although he made no pretensions to being of noble blood yet it was whispered he was the younger son of an earl, a little under a cloud on account of a difference with his noble sire now, and being of an independent nature he had sought refuge in the New World rather than submit to parental tyranny.

This little romance had made him quite popular with the Anglo-maniacs of the city, and gave him the entree into a good set.

Both these adventurers—for we will not attempt to deceive the reader in regard to their true characters—were capital billiard-players and expert gamblers, but as they were cunning enough to conceal their real expertness in these lines, only joining in a game when pressed to do so, and never offering to play for money openly, although artfully leading up to that point when they fancied there was a chance to victimize some one—nobody suspected that they were only a couple of sharpers, and so they had no difficulty in winning enough money of their associates to keep them going in fine style.

It was early in the evening when the stranger from San Francisco arrived, and the adventurers had just made their appearance—it was their custom to make the round of the up-town hotels until they met some of the bloods who were likely to prove fair game—and as they were in the neighborhood of the hotel office they overheard what passed between the stranger and the clerk.

The breezy, independent manner of the Pacific-Sloper, as well as the sight of his big roll of bills, made a decided impression upon the two adventurers.

They exchanged glances, and the marquis remarked:

"My dear fellow, it seems to me that this young gentleman's acquaintance could be profitably cultivated."

"Exactly my own idea, don't you know," the Englishman replied.

"Will you try your luck and see what you can make of him?"

"Yes, I don't mind."

"I will stroll into the bar-room and after you have pumped him you can join me there."

Then the marquis sauntered away, and Fitzherbert, watching his opportunity, soon managed to get into conversation with the young man.

The Californian, after arranging about his room, helped himself to a chair and lit a cigarette.

The Englishman soon sauntered up, begged for a light, also producing a cigarette, and took a chair by the side of the other.

With such a frank, hearty young man as the Californian, it was the easiest thing in the world to get into conversation, and in the course of half an hour, Fitzherbert succeeded in learning all he cared to know, then he pretended that he had an appointment to "meet a fellow, don't you know," in the bar-room, and departed.

The marquis was waiting anxiously for the report.

"By Jove! old fellow, I think we have struck it rich, as these Americans say!" the Englishman exclaimed, when he encountered the Gaul.

"I am glad to hear it!" the other replied.

Then the two withdrew into a corner where they could converse without danger of their conversation being overheard.

"It really though seems a pity for two such old hawks as we are to take advantage of the charming innocence of this young man," Fitzherbert remarked in a reflective way.

"Oh, never mind moralizing!" the other retorted. "It is what we hawks are for, to prey on pigeons of this kind."

"Well, his name is Thomas Mackay, he comes from San Francisco, which is the big city of California, you know, and is interested, heavily, in mines; although he isn't anything more than a boy yet he is deep in speculation. I fancy from what he said that he is some relative of that Mackay, whose wife cuts such a figure in England and on the Continent."

"Ah, yes, I know the man; he is a modern Croesus!" the Frenchman exclaimed. "They say his income is a thousand dollars a day."

"I judge from this young fellow's talk that he has plenty of money. His business here is to sell shares of some mines in which he is interested, and he speaks as carelessly of transactions amounting to thousands of dollars as we would of so many cents."

"But is it not a characteristic of these far Western men to tell big stories even when they have but little to back them up?" the marquis asked, shrewdly.

"They have that reputation, I believe," the other admitted. "But in this case I do not believe that the young man is boasting, or talking for the sake of merely hearing his own words. I do not think there is any doubt that he has plenty of money of his own and also represents a large sum belonging to others."

"If this is truth he ought to be a pigeon worth the plucking," the Frenchman commented.

"Oh, yes, my dear boy, and I do not think we will have any trouble in doing the job, the dear child is so innocent!"

"He will know more when we get through with him," the marquis remarked with a fine touch of sarcasm.

"Oh, yes, undoubtedly," the Englishman rejoined. "And now, how shall we go to work?"

"That requires deliberation," said the marquis. "If the pigeon is anywhere near as rich as you suppose, we must proceed with caution, for it is our game to make a haul worth having."

"Yes, yes, undoubtedly."

"Being a big fish, we must play him until we have him safely in the net and can land a grand stake."

"That is my idea, my dear fellow."

"The first thing is to introduce him to the home of the Red Princess," the marquis remarked after reflecting over the matter for a few moments.

"Yes, the novelty of the female gambler will be apt to appeal to his curiosity."

"Then we can lead him gradually on to play, and when we ascertain how the ground lies we can make arrangements for a big strike."

"All right; the programme seems to me to be an excellent one," the Englishman remarked.

"If we play cautiously we may be able to seize upon a large sum, and I must remark that it is about time that something of the kind occurred, for I have noticed that the majority of our pigeons are beginning to be tired of being plucked; of course it is not superior skill, but just luck—the chance of accident which causes us to win so constantly," and the Frenchman winked knowingly at the other. "But our birds are beginning to take the alarm. The most of them have lost more than they can well afford."

and unless we hunt up fresh game we will soon be in the hole."

"True, and it seems to me that Dame Fortune, who always looks with a partial eye upon gentlemen in our line of business, has sent this Californian infant on purpose to give us a chance at him—to give us a chance, don't you know, to relieve him of some of his surplus wealth."

"Yes, it certainly does look that way," the marquis replied. "Well, shall we begin operations right away?"

"Oh, yes, dear boy, there is a world of truth in that saying in regard to striking when the iron is hot. Come along and I will introduce you, and in a while we can bring up the subject of the Red Princess, and see if we cannot get him interested."

The two proceeded to the office.

The Californian had just finished his cigarette, and was yawning in a manner which suggested that he was terribly bored, when the two approached.

"I was just speaking to my friend here about you, don't you know," the Englishman remarked, as the pair came up to the Californian. "He is a stranger in the city, like us, and I think you ought to know him."

The Pacific-Sloper immediately said that it would give him great pleasure to make the acquaintance of any friend of Mr. Fitzherbert.

The introduction followed, and the pair sat down by the young man.

"Well, what shall we do to kill time tonight?" the Englishman asked. "What do you say to a call upon the Red Princess?"

CHAPTER IV.

THE RED PRINCESS.

THE address of the name at once attracted the attention of the Californian.

"The Red Princess!" he exclaimed. "That is a strange appellation for any one in New York to bear. Who is the Red Princess?"

"My dear sir, you have given me a riddle which is not easily solved," the Frenchman replied. "The question which you have just asked is one that has perplexed the brain of a great many men in New York, and none of them have been able to answer it, as far as I know. In fact, the Red Princess is a decided mystery."

"But you can enlighten our friend in regard to her, even if you cannot tell who she is," the Englishman remarked.

"Oh, yes, I can do that easily enough," the marquis replied. "The woman who bears the strange name of the Red Princess is a lady of thirty or thereabouts, handsome and distinguished-looking, a foreigner—some say a Russian—in fact, it is generally believed that she is a native of that country, but no one knows for certain, for she speaks half a dozen languages with equal fluency. She resides in a charming little house on one of the cross streets leading from upper Broadway; the place is elegantly furnished, and she holds a *salon* in true European style in the evening. In her parlors you will find from ten o'clock until two or three in the morning all the male notabilities of the town. She usually has some musicians, singer, elocutionist, or something of that kind to entertain her guests, and one can always be sure of spending a pleasant evening, and a collation is served punctually at midnight."

"The parlors are on the first floor, on the second are another pair, devoted to the Goddess of Chance, and men who seek an easier road to fortune than comes from diligent toil can try their luck at a variety of games."

"Ah, yes, I see!" exclaimed the Californian. "We have plenty of places of that kind in San Francisco, but none run by a woman."

"That is where the attractiveness of the Red Princess's establishment comes in!" the Englishman remarked. "New York is like San Francisco in the respect that a man who is anxious to get rid of his money can find plenty of places ready to afford him a chance, but, as you say, none run by a woman, and then as there is a mystery about the lady it provokes curiosity."

"As far as can be discovered she is a political refugee," the Frenchman added. "She was hunted out of Europe and crossed the seas to avoid her enemies. Here, friendless in a strange land, she knew not which way to turn, and then she got the idea of setting up a *salon* after the European style; all the Russians are born gamblers, you know, the women as bad as the men."

"The thing was a great success and she is literally coining money," the Englishman declared.

"I do not wonder at it," the young man remarked. "The idea is a novel one; but how comes it that she is called the Red Princess?"

"It is on account of her hair, which grows in such profusion that it reaches almost to her knees, and being of a most beautiful red gold in color gives her the name."

"Well, I must admit that you have strangely excited my curiosity by this description," the Californian remarked. "And if you haven't any objections I should like to go with you and inspect this gorgeous tiger's den."

"Certainly! we will be delighted to have you

accompany us!" the Frenchman exclaimed with great cordiality. "And if you ever risk money on the turn of a card, and feel inclined to gamble a little, you can do so in the house of the Red Princess with the assurance that no unfair advantage will be taken of you."

"Oh, yes, there is no doubt about that!" the Englishman asserted. "And it is one of the secrets of the popularity of the house; the game is a perfectly square one."

"And entrance to the Red Princess's domains is not open to every one," the marquis added. "No Tom, Dick and Harry can go there at their own sweet will. The entrance is carefully guarded, and all strangers have to be introduced by some regular guest of the house."

"A wise precaution, and I presume the watch is also kept to prevent the intrusion of the police," Mackay remarked.

The others laughed.

"There is no danger of anything of that kind happening," the marquis asserted. "The Red Princess has friends at court. High officials of the city are sometimes seen in her *salon*; they go out of mere curiosity, of course, and they never suspect that there is a gambling hell in full blast on the second floor."

"You know the old adage: 'there are none so blind as those who will not see,'" added Fitzherbert.

"This Red Princess is evidently worth a visit; I will be glad to go with you, and although I am not much of a sport in a gambling way, yet I don't mind risking a couple of hundred to see how 'Frisco luck goes in New York."

The adventurers exchanged glances.

The Californian spoke as carelessly of hundreds as ordinary men do of tens.

"It is not yet nine; suppose we while away an hour or so in one of the theaters, and then go," suggested the marquis, and the rest agreed.

CHAPTER V.

THE TIGER'S DEN.

THE three set out.

They went to one of the Broadway theaters and staid until a little after ten, and as they came out, Fitzherbert, a true Englishman, said:

"I think we had better take a cab, don't you know?"

"What is the use of that?" exclaimed the marquis. "It is only five or six blocks. We can walk there inside of ten minutes."

"Let us walk then, by all means!" said the Californian.

And so they proceeded up Broadway until they came to a certain cross-street, into which they turned.

Half-way through the block, the three came to a halt before a small, three-storied brick house.

All the curtains were tightly drawn, and there was no sign of life about the place.

"A nice, quiet neighborhood," the Californian remarked, as he looked around him. "No one would be apt to suspect that there was anything out of the way with this house."

"That is true," the marquis coincided.

The opening of the door in answer to the ring which the Englishman had given, interrupted the conversation.

A gigantic negro in a plain, dark livery, made his appearance.

"The Marquis De Neville, Mr. Adolphus Fitzherbert and a friend, Mr. Thomas Mackay, of San Francisco, for whom they vouch," answered the Frenchman.

"Walk in, sabs," ejaculated the negro, with a profound bow.

He ushered them into an inner entry, where there was a sofa.

"Have de kindness to be seated, gemmen, if you please," continued the guardian of the door.

The gentlemen seated themselves upon the sofa, and the negro disappeared through a heavy door at the end of the entry.

"I have been informed by men who profess to know, that the preparations against a surprise in this house are wonderfully complete," the marquis remarked. "Although it cannot be detected from the outside, there is a peep-hole in the front door, by means of which all applicants for admission are examined before the door is opened. Then, if by any trick, the police succeeded in gaining entrance, that door there"—pointing to the one through which the negro had disappeared—"is composed of solid iron, and would offer a stout resistance for fifteen or twenty minutes to a gang of men armed with sledge-hammers and crowbars, so that there would be plenty of time to remove all evidence that gambling had been going on before the police could get in."

The reappearance of the negro brought the speech to an end.

"Walk right in, sabs," said the servitor.

The three passed through the doorway, there was another entry, another door and the men entered a parlor fitted up in regal oriental style.

The pile of the carpet was so thick and soft that the foot sunk into it. The walls were covered with velvet hangings, reminding one of the tapestry of olden times; the furniture was quaint and old-fashioned, but each and every piece was of the costliest description.

There were a dozen well-dressed gentlemen in

the room, the most of them congregated at one end where a bearded foreigner sat at the piano playing in a manner which showed he was a master of the instrument.

In the front apartment—the parlors were double—sat the mistress of the house, and as the Californian looked upon her, seated on a luxurious easy-chair, like some queen upon her throne, he thought that she well deserved the title of the Red Princess.

She was a woman of thirty or thirty-five, a little above the medium height, and possessing a splendid figure.

She could not be called beautiful, for her complexion was too swarthy and her features too irregular, but there was a deal of character and expression in the face and it was one that improved upon acquaintance.

Her great charm was the magnificent red-gold hair, which, crimped into wavy tresses, floated around her shoulders like the halo of the saints of old.

A couple of gentlemen were conversing with the lady, but as the three approached they saluted, and joined the throng at the piano.

The Red Princess received the new-comers with a gracious smile, and she fixed her keen dark eyes, inquiringly upon the face of the Californian.

"I am glad to see you, gentlemen," she said, in a musical, well-modulated voice. "It is some time since you have honored my poor saloon with your presence."

"Ah, Madam La Princess, your attractions are so powerful that it is dangerous for one to expose themselves to the influence too often," the Frenchman replied, with a gallant bow.

"The god of flattery was surely a Frenchman since the art comes so natural to your race," the Red Princess responded, shaking her fan at the marquis.

"Oh no, no flattery! It is the truth, believe me!" the marquis responded, with another bow.

"Well, I am glad to see you, gentlemen, and I hope you will not desert me for so long a time again. It seems as if it was nearly a month since you were here."

"Barely two weeks!" Fitzherbert asserted.

"Possibly so," the Red Princess said, with a true French shrug of her well-shaped shoulders. "I suppose it is as your great poet says, 'Sad hours seem long.'" And she turned her brilliant eyes with a bewitching smile upon the face of the Californian.

The marquis seized upon the opportunity to introduce the young man.

"Madam La Princess, we have taken the liberty of bringing a friend with us," the Frenchman said. "This gentleman chanced to hear us speak of the Red Princess, and his curiosity being excited, he desired to enroll himself among your admirers."

"I am very glad indeed to make your acquaintance," the lady said, with a particularly gracious smile, and she frankly extended her hand, which was adorned with rings worth a king's ransom.

"Not more so than I, madam, for you are like Cleopatra of old, the account does but faint justice to the subject," the Californian replied, and then, taking the extended hand, he bowed and imprinted a respectful kiss upon it, as though it was the hand of a queen.

The lips of the Red Princess were wreathed in smiles as she listened to the complimentary speech, but when the Californian pressed her hand within his own strong palm and touched his lips to it, the smile suddenly faded from her face and a slight cry of alarm escaped her.

"Oh, your hand and lips are so cold!" she exclaimed, perceiving that the gentlemen regarded her with amazement. "They seem to chill me to the very heart."

"You should take that for a good sign!" the Californian exclaimed. "Have you never heard of the old saying that a cold hand betokens a warm heart?"

"Oh, yes," and, with an effort, she shook off the sudden fear that had seized upon her, and smiled again. "I hope that it is true, too, for I like people with warm hearts, and I will confess that I am very anxious to like you!"

"I am sure I will strive to do my best to deserve your liking," the Californian replied, with a gallant bow.

"Pardon me—how may I call your name?"

"Mackay—Thomas Mackay, of San Francisco," the other replied. "I am a stranger here in New York, and I count it a fortunate circumstance that the first lady acquaintance that I chance to make in this great city should be one so desirable as yourself."

"Upon my word, I believe you are a greater flatterer than this Frenchman!" the lady declared, with a charming smile.

The Californian denied the soft impeachment. "But I am so glad to make your acquaintance," the Red Princess continued. "You must not think that this is mere idle compliment, for it is not. I have heard a great deal of California, but you are the first native of that far-off land that I have ever met, and, believe me, it comes from my very heart when I say that I hope we will always be good friends."

"I trust so, madam," the Californian replied, evidently rather astonished at the earnestness

with which the other spoke, as were his companions also, whose brows slightly contracted as they exchanged glances.

"My doors will always be open to you, and the oftener you come the better I will be pleased," the Red Princess declared.

The young man bowed his acknowledgment of this flattering compliment, and at this moment one of the gentlemen in the back parlor commenced to sing, accompanied by the pianist on the instrument.

"What a fine voice!" exclaimed the Californian.

"Yes, he is a professional singer," the hostess explained. Herr Von Bishoff of the German Opera, and he is said to be the finest tenor that we have ever had in this country. My dear marquis, can't you find a seat in the other room for your friend, so that he will be able to enjoy the music?"

"Yes, I think so," the Frenchman replied, and then the pair bowed to the lady and proceeded to where the German tenor was pouring forth the silver notes which brought him in such a harvest of golden dollars.

As the gentleman turned away from the Red Princess she had made a rapid sign to the Frenchman which he understood to be a signal that she wished to speak with him, so, after listening to the singer for a few minutes he whispered to the Californian that he would be back in a moment and repaired to the lady of the mansion again.

The Englishman had seated himself, and the Red Princess motioned the marquis to a chair as he approached.

The three had the front parlor to themselves as the silver-voiced tenor had drawn all the rest into the rear apartment.

There was a grave look upon the face of the Red Princess and her gaze was fixed searchingly upon the young Californian, who sat so that the lady had a side view of him.

The stranger was, apparently, fond of music for he listened to the singer with the utmost attention.

"You have something to say to me?" the Frenchman inquired as he seated himself.

"Yes; where did you meet this young man?" she asked, abruptly.

"At the Fifth Avenue Hotel," and then he related how it happened that he and the Englishman had had their attention attracted to the Californian, and from the open manner in which he spoke it was plain that he did not fear to trust the Red Princess with his plans.

"You have selected this man for a victim?" she demanded.

"Yes, both Fitzherbert and myself think that he is a pigeon who will be worth the plucking," the Frenchman replied.

"You have made a mistake!" the Red Princess declared.

"Do you think so?" the Frenchman asked, rather astonished by the decided declaration.

"Yes, I do not think there is a doubt in regard to the matter," answered the lady.

"You are inclined to think then that the young man is not what he represents himself to be?" Fitzherbert questioned, thoughtfully.

"Oh, no, I have not troubled my mind in regard to that," the Red Princess replied. "In fact, I could but express an opinion upon the matter which would only be based upon conjecture, and I am not egotistical enough to believe that my judgment about any such thing would be in any way superior to that of two old and experienced men of the world like yourselves."

"What do you mean then?" asked the Frenchman. "If the man is all right if he is what he represents himself to be—a rich Californian—and it is a fair presumption, I think, to conclude that he cannot be as wise in worldly knowledge as two old stagers like Fitzherbert and myself—why should he not prove to be a pigeon well worth the plucking?"

The Red Princess shook her head.

"I do not think that such will prove to be the case," she said. "I am a woman, and, like the majority of my sex, am a firm believer in instinct."

"Now, my instinct warns me that this young man is dangerous."

"Both of you know me well enough to understand that I am not at all weak by nature."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed the two men in a breath.

"And in an emergency I can be trusted to do whatever part may be assigned to me as well as any man that ever existed."

"Yes, yes, you have proved that on a half a dozen occasions," the marquis remarked.

"No one who knows you will doubt either your discretion or courage," Fitzherbert declared.

"You may be sure then that it is no idle whim which leads me to think that this man is one who is likely to prove dangerous," the Red Princess remarked, earnestly.

"You must remember that I too am an old and experienced stager—and I have seen as much of life as usually falls to the lot of any woman," she continued. "But, in a matter of this kind I would rather trust my instinct than rely upon the wisdom gained by years of experience. I am of Gypsy blood, gentlemen; that is, on the

mother's side; although my father was a Russian prince my mother was a Gypsy girl—the queen of a band of Roumanian Bohemians, and reported to be the greatest prophess and reader of the future that had ever been known in all the Gypsy world.

"From that mother I have the gift of instinct which invariably warns me when danger threatens. You may think I am foolish, gentlemen, to attach any importance to presentiments, but I can assure you that on many occasions by ignoring the warnings I have suffered, and on others by heeding the feeling which told me that danger was near, I escaped serious peril."

"Oh, don't give way for a moment to the impression that I am no believer in presentiments!" the Frenchman exclaimed. "I have seen too much of life not to understand that there is something in them."

"Yes, yes, the man who does not believe in presentiments, or in luck, is an idiot!" Fitzherbert declared. "I have seen too many cases in my own experience not to know that there is a great deal in both. Of course, there is a great difference in people. The man who never has any presentiments is not apt to believe that any weight should be attached to them, and the fellow who leads a dull, humdrum life, is not apt to take much stock, as these Americans say, in luck, but to a man like myself, who depends upon his wits for his bread, I know that luck is everything. I have met with too many illustrations of the fact in the course of my own experience to have any doubt at all about the subject."

"That is my opinion, too," the marquis remarked. "And I am sure that it is the belief of nine out of every ten men who lead an active life; I am not speaking only of adventurers and men who live by their wits, but of cool, long-headed business men."

"Take the Rothschilds, the great kings of the money world, for instance," he added. "It is a well-known fact that the founder of the family owed his rise to great wealth entirely to the chance of accident, and people who know state that the Rothschilds are such firm believers in lucky and unlucky men, that they will not give employment to men who have made failures in conducting their own business."

"Oh, I have no doubt that it is the truth," the Red Princess observed. "But whether it is so or not with anybody else, I am a true believer in luck, and also believe in the strongest possible manner in presentiments."

"You have formed an unfavorable opinion in regard to this stranger?" the marquis asked, reflectively.

"Yes, the very moment I looked upon his face, something within seemed to whisper, 'Beware! this man is dangerous!' And then when he touched my hand a cold chill ran over me; it was as if I had been suddenly exposed to the icy blasts of winter."

"That is very strange!" was the marquis's comment, and his dark brow was knitted in thought.

"Yes, it is very odd, indeed," the Englishman added.

"It certainly is remarkable that the man should have produced such an impression upon you when both Fitzherbert and myself, after carefully examining the fellow, had come to the conclusion that we could make a good thing out of him," the Frenchman continued.

"Well, gentlemen, it is beyond my power to explain how it is," the Red Princess observed. "But it is certainly the truth that I have a presentiment that this Californian is the most dangerous man that I have ever encountered, and not for the world would I enter into any game against him, for I should look for an utter failure."

"Oh, we did not calculate to ask you to take a part in the affair," the marquis explained. "We merely brought him up here to show him your house as one of the notable sights of the town."

"I am glad you did it, for it has given me an opportunity to warn you," the lady remarked.

"And although, of course, I am not vain enough to expect that two old birds of prey like yourselves will give up a project by which you hope to make a rich haul merely because a woman has a presentiment that it will not prove to be successful, yet my words may serve to make you proceed carefully, and such a course may save you from serious consequences in case there is any truth in the warning which has come to me."

"You may rest assured that we will pay due attention to it," the marquis declared. "Both Fitzherbert and myself have a deal of faith in your judgment, but it is possible, you know, that the man may be dangerous to you and yet not dangerous to us."

"Oh, yes, that may be so," the Red Princess admitted. "My presentiment of danger coming from this man may have reference to myself alone."

"There is something in that," the Englishman remarked.

It was plain that neither of the two adventurers felt inclined to give up the game on account of the woman's presentiments.

They thought that the Californian would prove

to be a rich prey and they were eager to get him in their toils.

"It is possibly true that you may succeed in your designs, but I can assure you, gentlemen, that there isn't any inducement which would be likely to get me to try to measure strength with this man!" the Red Princess declared with an earnestness which showed that she meant every word she said.

"Study his countenance, my dear friends, as he sits there now, listening to the music, and all unconscious that he is watched."

"Look at the peculiar massive jaw—it is well-formed—in fact rather small for a man, yet is there not a suggestion of the bull-dog in it? None of his features are large—really, for a man they are so small as to seem effeminate, yet if he was a woman they would appear to be enormously strong; and then his eyes! Did either of you ever see such a pair of eyes in the face of a human before? They are more like the eyes of an animal than the orbs of a human."

"Well, it is rather odd," the marquis remarked, "but I must admit that I never noticed his eyes; it is as you say, though. His eyes are most certainly strange."

"Yes, they appear to be changeable in color," the Englishman remarked. "I thought that they were gray, but now they appear to be black."

"And when he was talking to me there was a greenish shade to them," the Princess declared. "And I fancied, too, that the pupils could dilate or diminish in size according to the mood of the owner, and all the time I was surveying them I could not get rid of the impression that the eyes were far more like the eyes of a cat than those of a man."

"Well, we will be on our guard and will try not to be caught napping," the marquis said.

And then the two rejoined the Californian.

CHAPTER VI.

THE CALIFORNIAN TRIES HIS LUCK.

THE tenor came to the end of his song just as the two adventurers came up to the Californian.

There was loud applause, and, being pressed by his admirers, the gentleman consented to favor the company with another air.

"Are you fond of music?" the marquis asked.

"No, not particularly," the Californian replied.

"The gentleman is a magnificent singer, no doubt, but I confess I do not care much for this grand opera business. My education in that line has been a little neglected I am afraid."

"Suppose we go up-stairs and see how the game is going on," Fitzherbert suggested. "I must admit that I am not a great admirer of this style of music either; I prefer something more simple."

"Yes, this operatic music needs the accessories of the stage to make it effective," the marquis remarked.

Then the three proceeded to the second floor, but in the entry, at the head of the stairs, they came to a locked door, which was not opened in obedience to the Frenchman's knock until the guardian of the portal, a stout, middle-aged negro, took a careful survey of the party through a peep-hole in the door.

"Upon my word this place is well guarded!" the Californian exclaimed, as the negro closed the peep-hole and proceeded to shove back the massive bolts which protected the door.

"Yes, even if any intruders managed to gain admittance to the first floor they would be put to considerable trouble to get to the second where the game is run," the Frenchman remarked.

"That is certain!" the Englishman exclaimed. "And men who are posted in regard to the premises say that if the fellows who run the place can secure five minutes' warning they have things so arranged that all evidence that there has been any gambling going on can be removed, and the smartest detective in the city would not be able to find any proof to warrant an arrest."

The door opened at this moment, and the negro bade them enter with the politeness of a dancing-master.

The rooms on the second floor were a counterpart of those on the first and furnished equally as luxuriantly.

There was a roulette-table in the front room and a faro game was in full blast in the rear apartment.

A massive sideboard stood against the wall which separated the two rooms, with a fine supply of wines and liquors, flanked by an elaborate cold lunch, and to these refreshments the guests paid their attention every now and then.

A colored servant was in charge of the sideboard, and he waited upon the gentlemen with a dexterity and grace which showed that he had been trained in a good school.

The three looked around for a minute, none of the guests taking any notice of the newcomers—it is contrary to the rules of etiquette which prevail in such places for the guests to evince any curiosity in regard to each other.

"Well, what do you think of it?" the marquis asked.

"It is a fine outfit," the Californian replied.

"I doubt if you have anything superior to it on the Pacific Slope, although I have heard that you have some fine places in San Francisco," Fitzherbert remarked.

"Oh, yes, but nothing any better than this, although we have some shebangs big enough to make six of this one, but I will admit that for style this is a little ahead of anything we have," the young man remarked.

"Will you try a glass of wine, or something stronger, and a mouthful to eat?" the Frenchman inquired. "All is as free as air, you know, and you are not under any obligation to play, even if you should be hungry and thirsty enough to clear the sideboard."

"Oh, I understand that, of course," the Californian replied. "That is the rule in houses of this kind all over the world, I believe. But I don't mind a glass of wine, but as I am going to play a little I don't care to drink anything stronger, for I want to have my wits about me."

"That is wise, certainly!" the marquis declared.

The three approached the side-board and indulged in a glass of sherry wine and they went up to the faro table where they watched the game for a few minutes.

Then the Californian drew out his "roll" and stripping off five twenty-dollar bills with the dexterity of a bank cashier, bought a hundred dollars' worth of chips.

Both the adventurers also invested, only they did not proceed on so great a scale, the Frenchman getting twenty dollars' worth and Fitzherbert fifteen.

After the game had gone on for about twenty minutes and the three had made several bets they came to the conclusion from the way in which the Californian played that he was an old hand at the game.

Both the marquis and Fitzherbert were good gamblers and played a "system," not at random as the unexperienced faro gambler usually does, and after they had watched their companion's game for a while they say that he was playing a system too, and were soon convinced that he had a fine knowledge of the game, for he made his bets in a skillful manner, and seemed to comprehend when the odds were in favor of the "bank," and when the cards were running the player's way.

The Californian was no "plunger" but made his bets with shrewd caution and as luck seemed to favor him in an hour he had quite a little stack of chips in front of him.

His companions were not so fortunate, for although they were both good players luck was not "running their way" on this occasion and by the end of the hour their chips had vanished.

"Well, are you all through, gentlemen?" the Californian asked, as he noticed that they did not evince any idea of investing in any more chips when the cashier drew away their last pieces of ivory.

"Yes, I think so," the marquis replied. "I am evidently not in luck to-night, and there is little use of a man's playing when fortune refuses to smile upon him."

"Very true," the young man observed.

"By Jove! I haven't had a bit of luck," the Englishman declared.

The Californian looked at his watch.

"Half-past twelve," he said. "Well, as you gentlemen have had enough I will stop."

So he cashed in his chips, stuck the money in his pocket, in the most careless way, and rose from the table.

Another glass of wine was indulged in by all three and then they departed.

The adventurers allowed the Californian to get a little way ahead of them as the party descended the stairs so that they could exchange a few words without his knowledge.

"Shall we attempt to do any thing to-night?" the Englishman asked.

"No, I do not think that it would be advisable," the marquis replied. "I don't know whether the warning of the Red Princess is to blame for the peculiar feeling which has come over me in regard to this man or not, but one thing is certain and that is, I do not want to try any game until I have everything so fixed that there will not be any doubt about our making a success of it. I do not want to take any chances."

"My own idea exactly," the Englishman remarked. "I think the Red Princess overrates this man, but we want to fix the thing so that we cannot possibly make a failure, no matter how good he is. It is my impression that we can make a rich haul, if we only play our game well, but we must not be in a hurry, for we cannot gain anything by attempting to force matters ahead."

"No; it will be wise for us to play a waiting game."

By this time the party were at the street door, and the conversation came to an end.

The three walked toward Broadway, and when they arrived at the main thoroughfare, came to a halt on the corner, and there conversed for a few moments.

The adventurers were bound down-town for the French quarter, below Union Square, and so were going to take a car, while the Californian preferred to walk back to his hotel.

An appointment was made for a meeting on the following evening; the adventurers, being well posted in regard to all the sights of the gay metropolis, had volunteered to pilot the stranger around—show him the ropes, to use the old saying, an offer which the Californian had gladly accepted.

"You will find that I am a thoroughbred from Thoroughbredville!" Mackay declared, as he parted from the pair.

The adventurers boarded their car and away they went, while the Californian walked leisurely down the street.

Upper Broadway is by no means deserted until the small hours of the morning, and there were plenty of people on the street to keep the stranger company.

The Californian sauntered along, keeping his keen, gray eyes well open, seeing everything without appearing to take any particular notice of his surroundings.

When he came to Thirty-fourth street, he had to wait for a few moments on the curbstone, as a car was passing.

Just by accident he happened to glance behind him, and his eyes fell upon the figure of a stout, thick-set, rough-looking fellow, slouching slowly along the pavement, and the moment the man saw that the Californian had caught sight of him, he went to the curbstone, halted there, and gazed up Broadway as if he was looking for a car.

This maneuver immediately attracted Mackay's attention to the man.

"Hello, hello!" he muttered, "what are you up to? Playing the spy upon me? Upon my word it looks like it!"

"Well, it is lucky that I tumbled to your little game. But what is the object? What are you after, anyway? I think I will have to make you show your hand!"

The car passed, and the Californian resumed his walk. He had been careful not to pay any particular attention to the man, after having caught sight of him, for it was his wish to lead him on.

Half-way down the neat block was a saloon, with a window full of theatrical advertisements, and the Californian stopped for a minute and surveyed the pictures in the casement.

Thus he was enabled to cast a hasty sideways glance backward, and so discovered that the rough-looking fellow was still steadily following him.

Mackay performed this movement so adroitly that the man had no suspicion that the Californian had caught sight of him.

Again the young man went on—he had only halted for a moment, but when he came to the next saloon he entered and got a glass of ale.

The object of this was to satisfy himself beyond a doubt that the man was really on his track.

"If he is shadowing me he will be loitering somewhere in the neighborhood when I come out," the stranger mused. "If I am wrong in my conjecture he will have passed on."

But when the Californian came out of the saloon, about the first thing he saw was the fellow, some fifty feet up the street, standing half-concealed in a doorway.

"He is after me, sure enough!" Mackay muttered. "And as that is the case, it behooves me to find out just what kind of a game he is up to, and in order to do that I must get him away to some solitary place, where I will have a chance to interview him, without danger of interruption. It may be that this is only some common night-hawk who has picked me out as being a likely prey; but as the man's face seems familiar to me, there is a chance that there is something more to the affair. Anyway, I will get at the true inwardness of it if I have any luck."

Having come to this determination the Californian left Broadway, and went through one of the cross streets to Eighth avenue, the man following steadily on his track, and twice the fellow quickened his pace when a lonely part of the street was reached, as though he intended to make an assault; but on these occasions other wayfarers had come up, so that the fellow was not able to carry out his intention.

At Eighth avenue Mackay took a car, and, as he expected, his tracker boarded the same vehicle, getting on the front platform, and at this point the Californian fancied he had made a discovery which amazed him considerably.

He was certain now that the man was shadowing him; there was no doubt in his mind in regard to the matter, and there were a couple of ill-looking fellows who were shadowing his shadow.

He had noticed the pair before, and his first thought had been that they were pals of the man who was following him, a conclusion which made him shake his head and look grave.

"Three against one is pretty big odds," he had murmured. "But since I have got into the affair I will try and see it through."

The two men also got on the car; they were able to do this without trouble, although they had been some distance in the rear, for the vehicle halted for fully a minute, to give time for some ladies and children to get off.

After the car started the Californian kept a

diligent watch, in order to see if he could detect any communication between the one man on the front platform and the two slender, boyish-looking, typical New York toughs on the rear end of the car.

Before the vehicle had gone a dozen blocks, Mackay became satisfied that the three were not pals.

The two men were shadowing the one, just as the fellow was shadowing him, and, what was more, the Californian soon became satisfied that the pair had no idea that the first man was in chase of him.

"Here is a game within a game!" Mackay muttered, after he came to this conclusion. "How is it going to end? That is the question that is now before the meeting; events alone, I suppose, only can settle that; and as it, apparently, devolves upon me to select the locality where the game must be played out, I will take care to pick out one where there will not be any danger of interference."

Acting on this idea, the Californian remained in the car until the upper part of the city was reached, where the houses were few and far between, a wild, lonely region, upon which the now rising morn shed a flood of silvery light.

The Californian left the car and struck off down one of the half-built-up streets toward the North River.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ASSAULT.

As he expected, the man on the front of the car followed in his footsteps. He made this discovery by casting a rapid glance over his shoulder, but he could not see the two young fellows who had been on the rear platform of the car.

"Could I have been mistaken in regard to the matter?" he muttered as he strolled leisurely along, like a man who had all the night before him, and was not at all in a hurry.

The moment he gained the sidewalk the Californian had thrust his hand in between his vest and pantaloons and drawn forth a revolver—not a little weapon, barely more than a toy, such as are commonly carried—but a good-sized tool, capable of doing excellent work.

It was a double-acting pistol, one of the latest patterns; a weapon such as would have delighted the eyes of an expert.

On went the Californian, and the tracker followed with almost noiseless steps.

That is, he attempted to tread as softly as possible, but in spite of his efforts in this direction, the keen ears of the Californian could distinctly hear his footsteps.

Three minutes' walk brought Mackay into an extremely desolate region.

Huge rocks rose out of the ground, and the street became merely an irregular road, not having been cut through.

The Californian took to the middle of the pathway; the road wound around a mass of rocks, by the further side of which was a tumble-down, deserted shanty.

As he passed the old house, the Californian gave it a wide berth; this was merely a natural precaution, for he had no suspicion that any danger lurked in or near the old house; but after getting beyond the shanty, a slight noise came to his ears, which convinced him that there were humans lurking in the shadows of the old house.

"Probably tramps, who have sought shelter for the night in the ruins," the Californian muttered as he cast a rapid glance back over his shoulder, after getting well by the old shanty.

It was his idea that he might be able to discover who it was that lurked in the shadow of the shanty, but the man, or men—Mackay judged that there were more than one—were so well concealed that he was not able to discover any traces of them.

He caught sight of his shadow, though, who was about a hundred yards in the rear, and keeping well in by the rocks so as to take advantage of their shade to escape observation.

A hundred yards more the Californian covered, and then his attention was suddenly attracted by the rush of feet followed by the cry of a man in agony.

The sound came from his rear.

He quickly turned, and beheld his shadow prostrate on the ground, and the two young toughs, who had been on the rear platform of the car, running up the street toward Eighth avenue as fast as their legs could carry them.

It was the first impulse of the Californian to open fire upon them, but as they were hardly within range he refrained.

He had guessed what had occurred, though. The pair, by a sudden detour, had gained the shelter of the shanty; there had lain in wait, and when the thick-set fellow came along, skulking in the shadow of the rocks, had sprung out upon him.

"It looks as if my man was badly hurt!" Mackay exclaimed, as he hurried to the spot. "The fellows must have used either knives or a club, for a pistol would have made a noise."

When he reached the side of the prostrate man the Californian knelt by him.

The man was lying face downward, and a low moan of pain escaped from him as Mackay bent his knee.

"Are you badly hurt?" the Californian asked. A groan came from the man's lips, he turned upon his side and stared up in the face of the other.

A moment the man stared and then he exclaimed:

"Is it possible that it is you—are you fated to be my evil genius?"

CHAPTER VIII.

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

THE Californian cast a searching glance at the face of the prostrate man.

The chin—in fact, about all the lower part of the face was covered with a scrubby beard, but in spite of the change which this made in the appearance of the man the Californian had no difficulty in recognizing him, although, for a reason, he pretended not to be certain, and remarked:

"Well, it seems to me that I have seen you somewhere before. And from the way in which you speak you don't appear to have any doubt about the matter."

"Why do you attempt to make out that you don't know me?" the man asked. "I am just as certain as can be that you know who I am well enough, and I wish to Heaven that I had guessed who you were when I started in on your track, but your disguise was so perfect that it deceived me, and I had not the slightest notion who you really were when I picked you out for a likely prey. It is fate, I suppose," he continued with a groan. "I have never had a bit of luck since I first met you, and now you have led me to my death."

"Upon my word I had no hand in this assault upon you!" the Californian exclaimed.

"Oh, I know that—I know well enough who it was that dealt me the blow, but you are responsible for it all the same."

"How do you make that out?" cried the other, in astonishment. "I give you my word that I neither know the men nor the reason why they attacked you."

"Yes, yes, I know that, but it is through you that I come to my death."

"You mean, I suppose, that if you had not followed me to-night you would not have fallen into this trap."

"Yes, that is it; as I said, you are my evil genius and you have led me to my death."

"Are you badly hurt?"

"Oh, yes, I am done for," the wounded man replied, with another groan. "Those two fellows know how to use their knives and they gave me a couple of slashes a piece."

"I will hasten to procure assistance for you!"

"No use, no use!" the man protested with a mournful shake of the head. "I am done for, I tell you, and all the doctors in the world will not do me any good. The fellows had it in for me, and I knew it too."

"Ah, they were your enemies?"

"Oh, no, I never saw either one of them before, but they were told to put me out of the way and they have managed to do the job up in first-class style."

"Do you mean to say that these two fellows were hired to murder you?" the Californian demanded, in amazement.

"No, not exactly hired, but they were told to do the job, and, of course, they were bound to do as they were bid."

"You are speaking in riddles!" the Californian exclaimed. "Do you mean to say that these two men were utter strangers who assaulted you because they were told to do so by some one else?"

"Yes, that is what I said, and that is the truth," the wounded man replied. "I am going to make a clean breast of it to you—I am going to let you see exactly how the game has been played. Of course you did not mean to do it this time but if it had not been for you I would not now be lying here, waiting for death to come. I don't doubt that I would have been killed in the long run if I had staid in New York, and it was my notion to get out of the city as quickly as I could, but I didn't have the money, and I struck after you to-night with the idea of making a raise."

"Go ahead! anything I can do for you I will not shrink from."

"It was fate itself that fixed this thing the way it is," the man declared. "Of all the people in this big city there is no one who can handle this job better than you can, and that is the reason, I s'pose, why you are let in for a share in it. Fate has picked you out to be the destroyer of the biggest and most dangerous gang that New York has ever known."

"A gang, eh?" the Californian exclaimed, a peculiar light shining in the strange gray eyes.

"Yes; it is an English transplant—the Band of the Invisible Hand, and each and every member of the gang has a bright red hand tattooed on the flesh, and in such a place that it can't be seen without a careful examination, and that is why it is called the Invisible Hand."

"My mark is on the side of the second finger of my left hand, the side next to the first finger, close to the knuckle, and as it is not bigger than a grain of corn, there is not much danger of anybody discovering it; but now that you know where it is, if you look carefully you will see it."

The Californian made an examination.

"Yes, here is the mark, sure enough."

"Every one of the band wears the brand of the Invisible Hand, but some of the members have the hand disguised with other tattooing in such a way that it cannot be distinguished until it is pointed out."

"Yes, I see; a wise precaution it seems to me."

"It is the Invisible Hand men who have struck me down. They believe that I have betrayed the secrets of the band to the police, because when I got in a hole I managed to slip out; the chief too wanted me to lay you out and I begged to have another man put on the job."

"Oho! the Invisible Hand fellows had it in for me then?"

"Yes, you were responsible for the arrest of the two principal members of the band and they wanted to get square."

"But as both the man and woman took poison and died I should have thought that would have broken up the band," the Californian remarked.

"There was some gum game about that thing!" the man asserted.

"How so?"

"Both of 'em are alive!"

A look of amazement came over the face of the other.

"It is not possible!" he exclaimed.

"It is the truth!" the man persisted. "And it was because I believed them to be dead that I got in trouble. Although I was out on bail and the programme was for me to cut and run, I reckoned I would rather stay in New York, so I tried to square the thing with the chief of police, but I did not give away anything concerning the Invisible Hand people."

CHAPTER IX.

THE OATH.

"BUT as you succeeded in getting out of the scrape, your associates believed that you owed your escape to the fact that you had betrayed them," the Californian said.

"Yes; they argued that I had come to the conclusion that as the captain was dead the band would bust up, and I had made up my mind to make what I could out of the affair."

"That was a natural conclusion," the other remarked. "I suppose they reasoned that they would have tried a game of that kind if they had been situated as you were."

"Ah, but nobody ever said that Tom Finn wasn't a square man!" the wounded fellow exclaimed. "I have always borne that reputation. I have been pinched by the police afore now and I never tried to get out of the hole by giving away my pals; that is, not when my pals were true blue, and in this case I got out of the hole by splitting on a pal who was mixed up in a big bank robbery. I knowed the chief was anxious to find out who was the man that did the job, and as the cove that cracked the crib was doing time in a Western jail, I did not hesitate to give the snap away, particularly as the cove had a growl with me once, and I had been warned that he had threatened to put a knife in me the first chance he got."

"Under those circumstances you could hardly be blamed for giving the man away if by so doing you got yourself out of a scrape."

"It has cost me my life though," the wounded man said with a groan. "For I couldn't make the captain believe that I did not betray the gang."

"By the captain do you mean Leander Brakespear?" the Californian asked.

"Yes."

"And he is alive?"

"Oh, yes."

"But I do not understand it," the other remarked with a puzzled air.

"No more do I, but it is a fact, all the same."

"Brakespear and this Fifth avenue woman, Mrs. Darlington, when arrested, charged with an attempt to commit murder, managed in some way to take poison; they were brought to Police Headquarters in an insensible state and soon died. There was no doubt about the matter for the coroner held an inquest upon the bodies and rendered a verdict accordingly."

"Yes, I know that, but the captain is alive, I am sure of that, for I saw him; the woman I don't know anything about."

"Well, this is one of the strangest stories that I ever heard."

"The captain was in bed, a pretty sick man I should judge from the way he looked, for he was thin and as pale as a ghost, and he could hardly speak, too, above a whisper. He charged me with giving the gang away and said he had me lured to the house on purpose to square the thing with me. I swore that it wasn't so, of course. If I had been guilty, I wouldn't have owned up to it, anyway. The captain said I would have a fair trial and had me put in the cellar for safe-keeping."

"Well, you were in a hole then," the other commented.

"You bet! and when I come to think about the thing I concluded to get out of it if I could, for I saw that I would have a good deal of trouble in proving that I was innocent."

"I am a pretty old jail-bird and it must be a strong cage to hold me. I had my tools with me, concealed in the heels of my shoes, which were

made hollow for that purpose, and it did not take me long to get out; then I made up my mind to emigrate from New York, but as I was short of cash it was necessary for me to make a raise somewhere, and so I picked you out for a victim, and that is where my cursed ill-luck came in. As I said, right in the beginning, you have been my evil genius; ever since I met you not a bit of luck have I had."

"It was not my fault though that these toughs struck you down."

"No, but if I had not followed you, maybe they would not have been able to get a chance at me."

"Possibly not."

"It was fate!" the man groaned, evidently getting weaker. "I am coming rapidly to the end of my rope, and I have a last favor to ask of you."

"All right! I will grant it if I can."

"Will you avenge my death?"

"Avenge it?"

"Yes, break up this Invisible Hand band; you will find that it is a tough job, but you can do it if anybody can, for you are a natural-born bloodhound."

"I will try my best to accomplish the task; your death shall be avenged and the gang destroyed if it is possible for me to do the job."

"Swear it!" ejaculated the wounded man whose strength was rapidly failing.

"I do—I swear by all I hold sacred to bring to justice each and every member of the Invisible Hand band!" said Tom of California solemnly. "And now give me some points to aid me. Where is the headquarters of the gang?"

"In an old house on South street, near—" and at this point a choking fit interrupted the man's speech.

"On South street, near—?" and the Californian bent eagerly to catch the words.

"Near—near—" gasped the wounded man, trying hard to speak, but the effort was too much for him; he choked, then gave vent to a low groan and rolled over on his face, dead, carrying the secret of the Invisible Hand band's headquarters to the grave with him.

CHAPTER X.

A CONFERENCE.

CHANGE we the scene now from the lonely up-town street to a small English ale and chop-house on Houston street, a short distance from Police Headquarters, and the time is some seven hours later, making it almost eight in the morning.

The chief of police had just entered the chop-house, called for a glass of ale and passed into a small private room in the rear of the bar.

This place was kept by a retired detective, a man who in his day had been reputed to be one of the best officers on the force, and it was a regular house of call for detectives and police officials when off duty.

It was nothing out of the way then for the chief of police to drop into the saloon once in a while for a glass of ale, and no comment was excited thereby.

But if any spy had been put upon the chief's track to watch his movements, the sleuth-hound would have noted that the chief, after ordering his ale, always passed into the private room and the door was closed, so that no one in the main saloon could see what went on in the small apartment.

If the spy had been allowed to push his researches further he would have discovered that there was a rear door to the apartment leading into the entry of the chop-house, so it was possible for any one to gain an entrance into the small room without passing through the saloon, or being seen by any one who might be there.

As the reader has probably conjectured the chief visited the saloon for another purpose than to enjoy his ale.

The calling for the liquor was only a blind to deceive any prying eyes that might watch his movements.

In the apartment the chief of police held interviews with spies whom he did not wish to be seen entering or coming from Police Headquarters.

It was his idea to keep their identity a secret from every one—even from the detectives for whom the spies cut out work.

On this occasion when the chief entered the private room it was occupied by the young man who had claimed to be Thomas Mackay, the Californian.

As the reader has probably suspected long ere this, the party was not a Californian—his name was not Thomas Mackay, but he was a sleuth-hound who was making a name second to none that the annals of the New York detectives had ever known.

There was a telephone connecting the ale-house with the chief's office, so that he could be speedily summoned when his presence was desired.

After the official entered the room and closed the door he hesitated for a moment, carefully surveying the young man, who sat by the round table in the center of the apartment, smoking a cigarette.

The chief was evidently puzzled.

"Don't you know me? Is my get-up as good

as all that?" the young man asked with a quiet smile.

The perplexed look disappeared from the face of the official and a laugh came in its place.

"Upon my word! your disguise bothered me!" he exclaimed, as he approached the table and took a seat.

"It must be a good one then."

"It certainly is; I did not know you until you spoke."

"I took the liberty of summoning you this morning, for I think I got on the track of an important matter last night."

"That was right. By the way, do you know that the crook to whom you owe your introduction into the detective force of New York, Thomas Finn, died last night?"

"Early this morning, to be exact," the other said. "Yes, I was aware of it. I was with the man when he breathed his last."

"It is not possible that you had a hand in his death?" the chief exclaimed.

"Oh, no; but that is the matter that I come to speak about," and then the speaker proceeded to relate his adventures during the preceding night.

The official listened with the utmost attention, and when the tale was finished drew a long breath.

"Well, I must declare that you are about the luckiest party that I ever met!" he exclaimed. "You have managed to make a discovery which will, unless I am greatly mistaken, turn out to be of the utmost importance."

"I have heard of this Invisible Hand band before, but the clues which reached me were so slight and unsubstantial that I was inclined to believe that it was only a fairy story."

"I would have been inclined too not to take much stock in it had I not seen the brand on the man with my own eyes."

"And then this yarn that Brakespear is still alive—it does not seem possible."

"That is true."

"Are you sure that the man was not delirious when he made the statement? Was he in possession of his senses?"

"Oh, yes, he knew what he was saying."

"There is some dark mystery about this affair and we must endeavor to get at the bottom of it as soon as possible," the official remarked after reflecting upon the matter for a moment. "It seems incredible that there could be any mistake about the matter, for I saw the man after he was dead, and most certainly there was no life in his body then."

"But you did not make any examination?"

"No, of course not; I never thought of such a thing. The man was dead; the doctors said so, and the coroner held an inquest. There was no doubt in regard to cause of the death, for both the man and woman confessed before they became insensible, that they had taken poison. Now, under such circumstances, why should I have had any doubts?"

"Very true; there wasn't anything to arouse suspicion."

"Not a thing, and it seems to me that there must be some mistake about the matter. This man, Finn, either lied to you when he declared that he had had an interview with Brakespear, or else he was tricked in some way and made to believe that another was Brakespear."

"Well, I do not see any good reasons to support either supposition," the Californian remarked. "The man could not gain anything by speaking falsely, and he certainly was too well acquainted with the leader of the gang to be deceived in regard to his identity."

"It really appears as if both these statements of yours were correct," the chief of police observed. "The mystery is a deep one, and if you succeed in solving it you can take high rank in the detective force."

"I can try, at all events," the other remarked with a quiet smile.

"It was an unfortunate thing that death stepped in and stopped Finn's breath before he revealed to you the secret of the gang's headquarters."

"Yes, it is in South street somewhere."

"South street is a long street," the chief observed. "And there are half a dozen places in it which the police keep their eyes upon; saloons, you know, which are noted for being the resorts of bad characters."

"Suppose you have a list of these places made out for me, and I will examine them one by one, and so, perhaps, will be able to discover the headquarters of the gang," the Californian suggested.

"Yes, that is a good idea, and I will have the list made out as soon as I return to Headquarters."

"And as soon as I get it I will begin to investigate."

"You will not go in this rig, though," the chief remarked, with a glance at the handsome suit of the Californian.

"Oh, no," the other replied, with a laugh. "I do not know much about the South street dens, but from what little I do know, I fancy that any well-dressed fellow would meet with a particularly warm reception in some of them."

"By the way, I cannot help thinking of this statement that Finn made in regard to Brake-

spear," the official remarked, abruptly. "The doctor and the coroner both have an appointment with me at half-past eight—" he consulted his watch. "It is a couple of minutes after time. The chances are that they are at Headquarters now. I will ask them to step around, and then we will see what they think about the matter."

The telephone was called into play, and in ten minutes' time the police surgeon and the coroner made their appearance.

The chief of police recalled the poison cases to their minds, and then stated that he had heard a rumor that the man was alive.

Both of the gentlemen laughed at the idea.

"There was no doubt then that the man was dead?" the chief asked.

"Not the slightest!" replied the police surgeon, and the coroner confirmed the statement.

"Is there any possibility that the man could have taken some drug which would produce the appearance of death, and the effects of which would after a time pass away?" the Californian asked.

"Now you are getting into the realms of romance," the doctor observed dryly. "I have read of such things, and have been amused by the art which the author displayed in making the circumstance appear probable, but when you come down to solid facts, the trick cannot be done."

"Justice could not be cheated in that way, eh?" the chief remarked.

"No, sir!" the doctor declared decidedly, and the coroner echoed the opinion.

This brought the conference to a close.

CHAPTER XI.

A NIGHT INCIDENT.

FOR a couple of weeks after the death of the murdered Finn, the police authorities of the metropolis made every possible effort to apprehend the two young toughs who had committed the murder.

From the Californian a good description of the pair was obtained, and there was not a detective nor a policeman in the city who did not do his best to apprehend the murderers.

It was a source of wonderment to the "force" why the chief of police made such strenuous efforts to catch the rascals, for, as far as they could see, the affair was nothing more than a quarrel between some scoundrels, and if all three had perished in the fight, it would have been better for the community at large.

The official did not think that it was necessary to confide to his men that he was anxious to catch the murderers of Finn, because by so doing he hoped to get a clew to the mysterious gang which had set his power at defiance.

The search though was a fruitless one; no trace of the murderers could be discovered; they had either succeeded in escaping from the city, or else had found a hiding-place so secret, that the sleuth-hounds were not able to ferret it out.

It is just fifteen nights from the one on which the Invisible Hand men wreaked their vengeance upon a supposed traitor, and along South street, in the neighborhood of Peck Slip, a young, good-looking woman was hurrying.

The hour was late, nearly midnight, and the locality a lonely one.

The girl was hastening along as though anxious to get to her destination; she was well-dressed, a decided contrast to the poor outcasts who are usually to be met with in the locality at such an hour.

As the woman came to one of the cross-streets, a man came around the corner abruptly and confronted her, barring the way so she could not pass.

He was a medium-sized, rough-looking fellow, poorly dressed, and evidently under the influence of liquor.

"Hello! where are ye going?" he exclaimed, with a leer, and then he suddenly recognized the girl.

"Hello, hello!" he continued. "If it isn't Cuban Kate! Well, now, you are jest the girl I want to see. I was in your place to-night and spent every red that I had, and now I reckon it will be about the fair thing for you to tip me a small loan, so I kin git along."

"Out of my way, you drunken ruffian!" cried the girl, sternly, her dark eyes flashing fire. "You were not obliged to come into my place if you did not want to, and as to your spending all your money there, I have told you a half a dozen times that your room was better than your company."

"Oho, you are talking mighty loud now, but you ain't got any of your gang here to back you up!" the man declared, a dark look upon his ugly face.

"I do not need any gang. I am able to take care of myself, as you will speedily discover if you do not take yourself out of the way!" the girl retorted.

"Aha! now you are trying to scare me, but that game won't work! Come! hand over a trifle to keep me going, or it will be the worse for you," and he made a threatening gesture.

Then out from the shelter of a doorway came a young man who had been a silent witness of the scene.

The new-comer was a smooth-faced, boyish-

looking fellow, but possessed a well-knit, muscular figure.

He was poorly dressed in a dark suit, very much the worse for wear, regularly shabby in fact, although his face was a prepossessing one. From his dark olive complexion and black hair, which curled in little short, crispy ringlets over his well-shaped head, a judge of nationalities would have taken him to be a foreigner, a Frenchman or an Italian, although the cast of his features was like an Anglo-Saxon's.

"You had better take yourself off!" the new-comer said, speaking English as fluently as a native despite his foreign appearance.

"Wot's that?" cried the ruffian, indignantly. "Do you know who you are a-talking to? I am a bad man, I am, and you had better run away, sonny, or I'll chew you all up."

The new-comer had advanced so that he interposed between the rough and the girl.

"Oh, you cannot frighten me with your big words!" the youth exclaimed, contemptuously. "Get out or you will get hurt."

"I will have to smash you jest to git some of the greenness out!" the bully exclaimed. And, with the words, he made a rush at the other.

But the violent blow fell only on the empty air, for the youth dodged as the other advanced, tripped him with his foot, and then, as the man stumbled, hit him a terrible blow under the ear which sent the ruffian headlong into the gutter.

This was performed so quickly that for a moment it completely dazed the rough.

But he was game, although an ignorant brute as far as any boxing or wrestling skill went, despite that he set up a claim to be a bad man.

As soon as he could pick himself up, he squared off again at his youthful antagonist.

"You think you are mighty smart, I s'pose," he growled. "You kin dodge 'round as lively as a jumping-jack, but jest wait until I get hold of you and see if I don't break you in two!"

"Bah! you can neither wrestle nor fight," the other replied in supreme contempt. "If I close in with you I will make as great a show of you as I did before."

"Jest you try that game on once and see where you will come out!"

"I will!" the youth declared, and, to the amazement, not only of the ruffian but the girl as well, he was as good as his word.

In the most dexterous manner possible he closed in with the other, easily evading the blows which the ruffian sought to bestow upon him as he advanced.

He secured a peculiar grip, the man struggled with all his might, but the young fellow seemed to have legs of iron and arms of steel.

For a moment there was a fierce struggle and then, with a sudden twist, the rough was taken off his feet and slammed to the pavement so rudely that the concussion made him see more stars than he ever beheld in the skies.

He lay prostrate for fully a minute, totally exhausted by the fall, and then began to slowly pick himself up.

"Come, hurry up; time!" exclaimed the young fellow.

"Aha! you are one of those prize-fighters, I s'pose," the rough remarked when he got on his feet. "I reckon that I have got all I want. I'm a good man, but I ain't no prize-fighter, and it ain't to be expected that I kin hold my own ag'in' a reg'lar professional. I made a mistake when I run up ag'in' you, but I am satisfied now, I am; so long!" and then the man slouched away.

"I am very much obliged to you, sir," the young woman said surveying the stranger with curious eyes and he in turn took a good look at her.

She was a well-formed, rather handsome woman of five and twenty or thereabouts, a brunette with jet-black hair and eyes, and in appearance answered well to the name that the rough had given her, Cuban Kate.

"Oh, don't mention it," the young man replied, carelessly. "I interfered because it is not in my nature to stand by and see a woman injured."

"I was able to protect myself, see!" and the woman drew her hand from the pocket of the loose, light coat into which it was thrust, and the blade of an ugly-looking little dagger flashed in the rays of the electric light. "If you had not interfered I would have soon shown the rascal that I was not helpless at his mercy as he supposed," she continued.

"No doubt he would have been very much astonished if you had flashed the steel in his eyes," the young man remarked.

"I am just as much obliged to you all the same though," she replied.

"That is all right; I am glad that I was able to be of service to you."

"Do you live in this neighborhood?" the woman asked abruptly.

"Well, I live here as much as I live anywhere he replied with a light laugh. "The fact is I am a sort of a vagabond and I don't live anywhere in particular. I am a stranger in the city—have only been here three days."

"Do not fear to confide in me, for I may be able to be of service to you," Cuban Kate said.

"Oh, I am not afraid to trust you; in fact, I have nothing in particular to tell, anyway."

"You look like a foreigner, a Frenchman, or an Italian, and yet from the skill you displayed in boxing and wrestling it is safe to say that you are not, for no son of either one of those nations would be able to do what you have done."

"I think you are right there," the other replied, with one of his careless laughs. "I am English by birth, but my mother was of Italian descent, and there is where I get my tawny skin and dark eyes and hair."

"Both my father and mother died when I was a child, and I was brought up by a cousin of my father, who kept a public house in Bristol, England. He was a retired boxer, and his place was a house of call for sporting men, and so it happened that I was taught to box and wrestle at an early age; but when my master died, a few months ago, I was thrown upon my own resources, and I have had a hard time of it. I haven't any trade, you know; to serve behind a bar is about the only thing I can do. I was advised to come to this country, and was lucky enough to get a chance to go to California, but couldn't do anything there, and so drifted to New York, and I am fully as badly off as I was at home; to-night I am completely down on my luck. I have not a coin in my pocket, and know not which way to turn."

The woman had listened attentively to the young man's story.

"Perhaps it will be a lucky thing for you that you chanced to meet me to-night," she observed. "As you have doubtless guessed from what that ruffian said, I keep a saloon in this neighborhood; it is on the next block, a saloon and lodging-house combined; I can give you shelter there, and can find you employment if you are not too particular."

"Oh, I am not at all particular!" the young man asserted. "Beggars shouldn't be choosers, you know. You just give me a chance and I am willing to do almost anything."

"Even to braving the power of the law?" the woman asked, dropping her voice almost to a whisper.

"Yes, if the pay is big enough to warrant the risk," he answered in the same cautious tone.

"Come with me then and we will talk the matter over, for this is no place for a private consultation."

Then she led the way down the street.

CHAPTER XII. A SURPRISE.

A FEW minutes' walk brought the pair to the house over which Cuban Kate presided.

It bore the rather loud-sounding title of the White House Hotel.

On the ground floor was a saloon and small restaurant, in the rear an apartment fitted up for the accommodation of card-players; friendly games "for the drinks" were all that the gamesters were supposed to indulge in, but men who knew said that gambling went on constantly.

On the second and third floors were rooms which were rented out to lodgers; it was an old-fashioned house, two stories and a garret.

Cuban Kate led the way to her private parlor, which was in the rear of the second story.

She bade her guest be seated, and remarked:

"Now we can speak without danger of being either overheard or interrupted."

"Yes, it would seem so."

"Did I understand you to say that you were hungry?" Cuban Kate asked, abruptly.

"It is the truth, whether I said so or not," he replied in his easy, careless way.

She brought bread and meat and a small jug of ale.

"Now you can eat while I talk," she said.

"Yes, and do not fear but what I shall be an attentive listener," he remarked, and then he proceeded to attack the eatables like a man who had fasted for some time, washing the viands down with hearty draughts of ale.

"What is your name?" Cuban Kate asked.

"Norvel—William Norvel."

"Mine is Kate Sanches, and as I am from the island of Cuba, I have got the name of Cuban Kate."

"You might have a far worse nickname," he observed.

"Oh, yes; I don't object to it."

And then there was silence for a few minutes; the young man busy with his meal and Cuban Kate studying his face with great interest.

"You are a perfect stranger to me and yet, somehow, I seem to see something in your face which tells me that I can trust you!" the woman exclaimed, abruptly.

"Well, it is not proper for me to boast in regard to that, of course," the young man observed. "But I don't think that anybody that trusted me yet ever had reason to regret it."

"I am going to trust you, but are you willing to swear not to betray the confidence I am about to repose in you?"

"Oh, yes, I will take any oath you like."

The woman hesitated for a moment and then she extended her right hand and laid it upon the table. The young man by this time had finished his repast.

Upon the wrist of the hand was a flexible golden bracelet.

"Place your hand upon the lower side of the bracelet," she said, turning her wrist so that he could do as she wished.

He complied with the request.

"Now then, you most solemnly swear that you will keep faith with me and not betray the confidence I repose in you."

"Yes, I swear it!" the young man exclaimed with firm accents.

"You may not be superstitious but I can assure you that if you break this oath the most terrible consequences will befall you!" the woman asserted. "For you have sworn upon a sacred token—you have taken the oath upon the Invisible Hand!"

A look of amazement appeared upon the face of the young man.

"The Invisible Hand!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, see!"

She pushed the bracelet up on the wrist and on her flesh appeared a tiny crimson hand.

"What a strange mark!" Norvel observed.

"Yes, it is a mystic sign; you will notice that it is blood-red in color, and whoever swears on the Invisible Hand and then proves false to the oath will surely be overtaken by a bloody retribution."

"I will be faithful to the oath, never fear!" the young man protested.

Cuban Kate adjusted the bracelet again so as to cover the mark, then said:

"I don't know why I yielded to this whim in regard to you; you are a perfect stranger and yet I am about to intrust you with a secret which I ought not to tell except to a friend whom I know I can rely upon."

"Why do you trust me then?" was the young man's natural exclamation. "Why do you not select some one with whom you are well acquainted—whom you are sure can be trusted?"

"Because something tells me that you will serve me better than any one else whom I can get," the woman replied.

"If that is the case then—if you are willing to trust to this belief, go ahead."

"I am, as I told you, a Cuban by birth but left the island when I was a child and was brought up in New Orleans. I received a good education, although my father was a sporting man—a gambler, and led an extremely irregular life. My mother I never knew, as she died when I was a baby."

"Something like my own case," Norvel remarked.

"My father was interested in a gambling-house, and as I displayed remarkable talent for a child in playing upon the piano and singing, I often entertained my father's guests and so I grew used to a public life."

"It was not the sort of bringing up that a young girl should have, but my father kept a good lookout for me, and although I had no female friends at all, and my constant associates were the reckless men who frequented my father's gambling den, yet I was always treated with the utmost respect."

"When I was about eighteen I met my fate in the shape of a young man who became a frequenter of my father's place. He was a Cuban like myself, and was supposed to be extremely wealthy, for he always had plenty of money and spent it in the most lavish manner."

"He was a terrible gambler and an extremely successful one too. My father, who had been for years in the business, said that this Cuban understood the science of the different games as well as any man he had ever met, and played entirely by calculation."

"It was a strange coincidence that the Cuban's name was the same as my own, Sanches. Pedro Sanches he was called."

"That was rather odd," Norvel remarked. He was following the story with decided interest.

"Yes, but he was no relative, nor was he a kin of any of the Sanches's in Cuba with whom my father was acquainted, and, although a Cuban by birth, he knew nothing at all of the island, for he had quitted Cuba when a child and had never returned there."

"His story was that his father was a very wealthy man, but had become involved in the patriot struggle for the freedom of the 'ever faithful isle' from the Spanish yoke, and so had been forced to fly from the country. He had been prudent enough though before joining the revolutionists to transfer all his property to friends so that the Spanish Government was not able to confiscate it."

"Well, that was wise," Norvel commented.

"When the rebellion failed he was one of the few who succeeded in escaping from Cuba, and he spent the rest of his life in traveling around, enjoying life, and so it happened that this gentleman had been all over the world as he had been his father's constant companion."

"Was it a wonder that this dashing, good-looking young man, far superior to any gentleman that I had ever encountered, should make a strong impression upon me?"

"Oh, no, it was the most natural thing in the world."

"He soon fell desperately in love with me, and wooed me with the utmost ardor. My

father found out what was going on, and attempted to put a stop to it. I was amazed, for I had never even dreamed that he would object to my marriage with a gentleman so far above me in social station, and when I attempted to reason with my father, and told him this, he retorted that he did not believe a word of the man's story; it was all a lie; he was an adventurer, who depended upon his wits for a living; and as for his being a Cuban, he did not believe that he ever saw Cuba in his life."

"Well, it is rather odd," Norvel observed, "but that is just the opinion I formed, and, of course, all I know of the man is what you have told me."

"I know that you are a good judge of human nature," Cuban Kate remarked.

"I assume, from what I know of young girls, that you did not believe that your father was correct in this statement?"

"You are right; I did not. I thought that he spoke from blind, unreasoning anger, and we had a bitter quarrel, for I stoutly defended my lover. I was dazzled by his words, and although I was really fascinated by him, yet, possessing some of my father's shrewdness, I thought what a fine thing it would be for a girl, situated as I was, to marry a man who was not only a gentleman of standing and position, but independently wealthy."

"Yes, the prospect was enough to turn your head."

"But, blindly as I was in love with the man, and dazzled by the brilliant position he offered, I was not self-willed enough to run away from my father and marry him, as he wished me to do."

"It was a terrible struggle between love and duty, and as I wavered between my desire to yield to my lover's request and fly with him, and the affection and obedience I owed to my father, who sternly commanded me to give the Cuban up, and think no more of him, a dreadful event happened, which settled my fate."

"My father became involved in a quarrel one night, weapons were drawn, and in the fight my parent was killed."

"Thus I was suddenly thrown unprotected upon the world."

"And this was the Cuban's opportunity, of course."

"Yes, I had some money, for I had always acted as my father's banker; but I did not like any of my father's associates, and had no desire to keep on in the life which I was leading, although some of them were anxious I should do so, and after waiting a few months I yielded to my lover's wish, and we were married."

"And now a strange thing happened. The marriage seemed to bring bad luck to my husband, for his luck at play deserted him, he lost heavily, and within one month from the date of our union he was completely penniless. Then he confessed that he had deceived me. My father had been correct in his judgment; he was not wealthy, but only an adventurer, depending upon his wits for a living."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE COMPACT.

THE young man was not surprised by this disclosure, for he had expected as much from the beginning.

"I presume the blow was not such a heavy one as it would have been if it had taken you completely by surprise," he remarked. "For, in a measure, you must have been prepared for it."

"Oh, yes, I was; my father's words haunted me, and I was no young, unsophisticated girl, so ignorant of the world as to be readily deceived, and before my husband made the confession, I suspected that my father's judgment had been correct. And now in this extremity the money that I had inherited from my father came in play; but I was wise enough not to allow my husband to know how much I had."

"That was prudent, for when a gambler gets upon the down-grade, he never knows when to stop."

"You are right in regard to that; the money that I gave my husband quickly followed the other, and then, becoming reckless, he joined in with some desperadoes, whose acquaintance he had made, in a bank-robbery scheme."

"The attempt failed, and my husband was captured; I smuggled tools in to him and he managed to escape; then we came to New York."

"I met an old friend of my father, who was then running this place. He wanted to sell out, and as he made easy terms, I bought it, knowing that I could make a good thing of it; but since I have been here—I have been in possession over two years now—I have noticed that my husband is not the same as he used to be, and I begin to fear his love for me is failing."

"Gamblers are usually fickle-minded," Norvel remarked.

"Since coming to New York I have seen but little of my husband; he has become the associate of men who live by crooked work, and I fear that some day he will desert me. Not that I care so much for that, but I have determined that while I live, he shall not marry another woman."

The black eyes gleamed fiercely, and there were hard lines about the mouth as she spoke.

"Oho! do you think that there is any danger of his committing bigamy?"

"Yes, I do!" she replied, firmly. "I know that he has tired of me, although I have done everything in the world for him that a woman could do for a man; but he is a highflyer—a man who cannot content himself with settling down, and if he got a chance to win a woman with a fortune, I feel sure he would forsake me in a moment."

"Such chances, though, are rare," the other observed, with a smile.

"Ah, but to an adventurer like my husband, who is always on the watch, such chances do come sometimes," Cuban Kate replied.

"Now, then, I come to the service which I require at your hands," she continued. "My house is much frequented by a set of crooks with whom my husband is very intimate. A week ago I overheard part of a conversation between two of them. The mention of my husband's name attracted my attention, and I took pains to listen."

"It seems that there is in New York a young girl named Katherine Green, who has lately come into a fortune of over a million dollars."

"Oh, I think I read something about that case in a New York newspaper that I happened to see in San Francisco," the young man remarked.

"Yes, the particulars of the affair were published in the newspapers. This girl was a saleslady in one of the big drygoods stores, and this fortune was a perfect windfall to her. She is all alone in the world, no relatives but one—a cousin, an actor, who also inherited a million."

"Now I gathered from the conversation of the pair that a plot has been formed to introduce my husband to this girl at a watering place where she has gone for the summer, and he is to marry her and so get hold of her money."

"A nice little scheme," Norvel remarked. "But such a plot cannot always be carried out. The girl may not have known much when she was only a saleslady on a few dollars a week, but it is safe to say that since she has come in for a million her wits have been sharpened, and a girl with so much money as that will be certain to have plenty of admirers around her."

"You do not know my husband," Cuban Kate replied with a shake of the head. "He was able to deceive and fascinate me, although I had more knowledge of the world than falls to the lot of the great majority of womanhood."

"My first impulse when I heard of this scheme was to seek my husband and tell him that I knew what was in contemplation, but then I reflected how easy it would be for him to deceive me in regard to the matter."

"He would swear that it was all a scheme to fleece the girl out of her money, if he judged that it would not be wise to deny that there was any truth in the matter."

"His explanation would be, 'I will marry the girl—get hold of her wealth and then, with you, I will take wing to Europe and there enjoy all the luxury that the possession of a million of dollars can give.'"

"But I am no fool. He is beginning to tire of me, and if he could win this rich, young girl, he would be more apt to take her to Europe with him than me."

"Yes, it seems to me that it is likely," Norvel assented, after a moment's reflection.

"Now then, I want you to go to this watering place, and play the spy for me, I will furnish you with ample means to bear yourself like a prince. I can see from your manner that if you have proper backing your will be able to hold up your head with the best of them."

"Oh, yes, I think I can pass muster," the young man replied, confidently. "But I say there is one point that excites my curiosity—this Invisible Hand—what does it mean, and how did you come to have such a strange mark on you? Is it from your husband or your father?"

"From my husband; it is not a birth-mark but tattooed on the flesh; but you must not question me further about it, for it is something in regard to which I cannot offer an explanation; but what I said was true, that an oath sworn on the blood-red hand was sacred, and he who breaks the vow must suffer!"

"Oh, that is all right! You can rely upon my being faithful to my word. Now for a disguise. How would it do to masquerade as a wealthy Californian? I was there long enough to get posted!"

"The idea is a good one!" Cuban Kate asserted. "Serve me faithfully and you shall be well paid. Betray me and you shall not escape my vengeance."

Norvel protested that he would be faithful, and so the compact was made.

CHAPTER XIV. AT LONG BRANCH.

As the reader has doubtless suspected ere this, William Norvel, the English-Italian, and the dashing Californian, Thomas Mackay, were one and the same, but so well did the Californian play his part that he was able to deceive even such a keen-eyed woman of the world as Cuban Kate.

She had no suspicions that he was anything but what he pretended to be, and after she had furnished him with money to enable him to procure a disguise, and he made his appearance before her dressed as he was when we first introduced him to the reader, she was both amazed at the change in his appearance and delighted at the completeness of his disguise, as she thought it.

She expressed her satisfaction, and declared that she had no doubt he would succeed in his undertaking.

Off for Long Branch then went he—New Jersey's famous watering-place, the old-time Summer Capital, as it was commonly termed when Grant was President, and he and his friends had houses there by the side of the sounding sea.

Having been informed that the man, whose acquaintance he sought, had quarters at the West End Hotel, one of the most fashionable of all the hotels in the place, he went straight there and registered as a guest upon reaching the town.

It was in the height of the season, and all the hotels and boarding-houses were well filled with visitors, but the Californian, with his off-hand, careless way—hang-the-expense style!—had no difficulty in getting a good room.

He had gone by the morning train, and arrived just in time for dinner, and after the meal was dispatched he went to the piazza, took possession of an arm-chair and lit a cigarette.

Hardly had he got comfortably seated when a short, fat man, who had occupied a seat at the same table with him at dinner, came along and took a chair by his side.

The gentleman wanted a light for his cigar, the Californian supplied it, and then the two fell into conversation.

The new-comer was a great talker, and as the Californian was a good listener, the two got on well together.

The other was an old frequenter of the "Branch."

"I have been coming here every summer for the last ten years!" he declared. "And so I am well posted in regard to the place."

The Californian explained that he was a stranger from the Pacific Slope, and so the other volunteered to point out to him all the notables.

"You see I combine business and pleasure by taking a month or two at the 'Branch,'" the gentleman explained. "I am with one of the big New York dry-goods houses, and here I pick up some valuable customers."

"Ah, yes, I see," the Californian responded, glad to have had the good-luck to fall in with a man who would be able to afford him information.

In the course of ten minutes the gentleman showed that he had not given utterance to an idle boast when he had said he was well posted, for he was acquainted with almost all the prominent people who were summering at Long Branch, and as they drove by he told the Californian who they were, enlivening the description with many a choice bit of gossip.

While the pair were chatting together, a well-dressed gentleman, about the medium size, with the swarthy face, and dark hair and whiskers of a foreigner, sauntered by, nodding to the fat man as he passed, and bestowing a searching glance upon the Californian.

There was something about the man that attracted the attention of the Pacific-Sloper at once.

"Halloo! halloo! it seems to me that I have seen you somewhere before," Mackay murmured under his breath. And then he said aloud to his companion:

"Who is that gentleman—he looks like a foreigner."

"He is—a Cuban, Don Pedro Sanches, a wealthy planter, who has come to this country to invest in some improved sugar machinery. He has only been here a couple of days. I got acquainted with him last night. He is a fine fellow, and splendidly educated, speaks three or four languages, and has been all over the world."

The Californian was decidedly surprised by the appearance of the man. This was the party whom he had come to watch, and though he had expected to see a man like the Cuban in appearance, yet there was something about Sanches which puzzled him.

"I am certain that this man is no stranger to me, but where did I ever meet him? One thing is sure, I never knew any man by the name of Sanches. Of course the chances are a hundred to one that it is an assumed appellation; Cuban Kate hinted as much, although she did not say so outright, and from her story it is plain that she has never known him by any other name. Another point too, the man looked at me as though he suspected that he had seen me before, and yet I flatter myself that this get-up is good enough to puzzle the most intimate acquaintance that I have ever had, but from the fact that this fellow evidently has the idea that I am no stranger to him, I argue that he is a pretty sharp customer, and I must keep my eyes open, or he will get the best of me."

"He is a good-looking fellow, and I should like to make his acquaintance," the Californian remarked.

"That matter can be easily arranged," his companion returned. "I will introduce you. You will find him well worth knowing. He is very much of a gentleman, and decidedly good company. No airs about him at all, although he is said to be independently wealthy, a millionaire two or three times over, I believe."

"Well, it has been my experience that the men who really possess great wealth, are not, as a rule, half so inclined to put on airs as the fellows who only have a little."

"Yes, yes, that is true; no doubt about it," the other replied.

Just at this moment a pretty little village cart, containing two young ladies, passed by.

The girls smiled and nodded to the dry-goods man, and he removed his hat and made an elaborate salutation in return.

The Californian fancied that he recognized the ladies, and so he remarked:

"Those girls are about as handsome a pair as I have seen since I came here."

"Oh, yes, neither one of them was behind the door when good looks were given out," the gentleman answered. "The story of one of those ladies is quite romantic, another illustration of the correctness of the old saying that 'truth is stranger than fiction.' The girl is now worth a million of dollars, and only a little while ago she was a saleslady in one of the big drygoods houses, working for six dollars a week, and mighty glad to get it too."

"That is the story of our American life. This is the country of rapid rises to fortune, and equally rapid descents from wealth to poverty."

"I have known the girl ever since she was a child," the other explained. "In fact, I was an old beau of her mother, and came within an ace of marrying her; but we quarreled, as young people are apt to do, another fellow came along, and so the lady became Mrs. Green instead of Mrs. Thompson."

"Yes, I see."

"I suppose it was about as well though, for I don't think I was cut out for a family man," the gentleman observed, in a reflective way. "I was always rather peculiar and I don't think the life of a married man would have suited me at all. Still I always had a sneaking fondness for the lady who came so near becoming my wife and so kept up my acquaintance with her. After her husband died she had a hard time to get along and I was able to be of considerable assistance to her. I got the daughter a position at Ridley's—one of our prominent drygoods houses—a concern that I have done business with for years—and I can assure you that there was no one who was more rejoiced than a gentleman about my size when, by the death of her uncle, a wealthy Texan, this girl, Katherine Green, came in for over a million of dollars."

"She came to me for advice, when notified of this windfall, and I had my own lawyer take charge of the affair."

"That was extremely friendly on your part," the Californian remarked.

"A friend in need is a friend indeed," observed the fat gentleman, sententiously. "And that is the kind of a friend that I am. After the money was secured I had it safely invested, and, in fact, have acted as a sort of a guardian to her."

"And that is the reason why she is down here I suppose, under your wing as it were?"

"Yes, that is about the idea."

"Well, it seems to me that it is an extremely lucky thing for the girl to have the advice and assistance of a clear-headed, experienced man of business like yourself," the Californian remarked. "A girl situated as this one is, raised by a sudden revolution of fortune's wheel from poverty to wealth, without experience of the tricks and traps of the world, would be apt to fare badly without wise counsel to guide her actions."

"That is very true, and I think I may say, without being thought egotistical, that my advice has been of great value to the lady. I must however do her the justice to admit that this sudden rise to fortune has not turned her head in the least, for she is still just the same as when she was only a shop girl."

"That is not always the case," the other observed. "Sudden prosperity is apt to make a decided change, and usually for the worse."

"Very true, but in this instance it is not so. You noticed that there were two girls in the cart?"

"Yes."

"The taller one, who was driving, is Miss Green. The short, rather plump one is named Mathews. She was in the same department at Ridley's as Miss Green, and was her room-mate at the boarding-house, great friends, you understand, and when Katherine's fortune came she insisted upon Miss Mathews—who is an orphan, all alone in the world—giving up her position in the store, and coming with her; she had been her companion in the days of poverty, and she did not mean to be separated from her now that she was basking in the smiles of fortune."

"That showed that the young lady's heart

was in the right place," the Californian remarked, approvingly.

"Oh, yes."

And then the conversation turned into another channel, and we will not detail it, as it is of no interest to our readers.

CHAPTER XV.

ON THE BEACH.

THE fortunate meeting with the talkative Mr. Thompson put the Californian in possession of the facts which it was so important he should ascertain.

Now he knew exactly how matters stood.

"I believe I was born under a lucky star," he soliloquized, as he made his way to the beach on the morning after his arrival, with the idea of taking a look at the bathers.

Eleven o'clock was the fashionable bathing hour, and the Californian was rather early, as it was but a few minutes after ten when he arrived on the strand.

"Yes, yes, a lucky star was in the ascendant when my eyes first saw the light!" he declared.

"Just one man was there in this crowded hotel who could give me all the particulars in regard to the heiress, and who held such an intimate relationship with her that I can rely upon getting early information of her movements, and that man was the first whose acquaintance I made, and then, right at the beginning, I ran across the man whom Cuban Kate has hired me to watch, and, unless I am greatly mistaken, this Don Pedro Sanches is an old acquaintance of mine, but I cannot place him for the life of me.

"It is more than probable that he is disguised, and the disguise is a good one, too, to be so complete that I am not able to recognize the fellow, but the recognition will come in time, though; there is no doubt about that; sooner or later I will discover who my gentleman is, and the chances are that I shall be obliged to make things unpleasant for him, for such is life."

By this time the Californian had reached a position where a good view of the bathing beach could be had.

There was only a half a dozen people in the water, but as the Californian surveyed the scene, from one of the bathing-houses came the two girls who had attracted his attention in the village cart on the previous evening.

"Aha! there is the heiress and her friend," the Californian remarked, as the pair advanced toward the water.

They were attired in bathing suits and looked as odd and uncomfortable as the majority of ladies do when dressed for an invasion of old Neptune's dominions.

It was an almost perfect day for bathing, for there wasn't any wind and the surf which rolled in on the silver-sanded beach was particularly mild and gentle.

Life-lines were stretched from the shore to stakes driven down in the water and to these the timid bathers clung, jumping up and down as the breakers came rolling in.

The particular line to which the young ladies proceeded was unoccupied, and, grasping it, they proceeded to enter the water, indulging in the usual amount of little, feminine shrieks, as the waves dashed around them.

At this point the Cuban, Sanches, made his appearance from one of the bathing-houses, dressed for the water, and he entered the surf some twenty feet from where the girls were clinging to the rope.

The Cuban struck out boldly with the air of a practiced swimmer, and his scanty bathing dress revealed that he was blessed with a muscular, well-proportioned form.

"Now then, what is his little game?" the Californian questioned with the air of a cynic. "Does he hope by the display of his abilities as a swimmer to make an impression upon the girl, for that he has some object of the kind in view is certain."

Then the attention of the spy was attracted by a well-dressed individual who came sauntering along the beach and sat down on the sand by the side of the stake to which the life-line was tied—the line to which the two girls clung.

"Halloo! it seems to me that I know that gentleman!" the Californian exclaimed. "If my eyes do not deceive me that is my English friend, Fitzherbert. Is he a pal of this Cuban? And if so what little game is he up to now?"

It was indeed the Englishman. He was provided with a light-colored sun umbrella and as he sat on the sand he tilted it over his shoulder so that he was completely screened from the view of those in his rear.

There wasn't anything particularly suspicious in this, although the Californian shook his head in a peculiar way as much as to signify that he considered there was. He was sitting back near the bluff in the shade of one of the bathing-houses, so the Englishman did not notice him as he came along, his attention being directed seaward.

Fitzherbert only remained seated for a few minutes, then he rose and continued on down the beach.

Then the attention of the Californian was attracted by a boat, containing a single oarsman,

which was pursuing a course parallel with the shore, just outside the water-stake of the life-lines.

Just one good look the spy took at the oarsman in the boat, who was pulling in a lazy way, as though he was not in any particular hurry, and then he exclaimed:

"Well, well! it seems that I am fated to meet old acquaintances to-day. That is the French marquis. Birds of a feather flock together! That is an old saying, and an extremely true one. The chances are big now to my thinking that these two fellows, the Englishman and the marquis, are pals of this pretended Cuban, for it does not seem likely that it is just by accident that the three are here together.

"There is some game on foot and if I keep my eyes open I shall, undoubtedly, be able to discover what it is. These gentlemen have little idea that there is a shadow on their track, keeping a diligent watch upon their movements."

The boat came to a halt about a hundred feet below the stake of the life-line to which the girls clung, but as the tide was setting down the coast, the oarsman was forced to keep his oars in constant motion so as to hold the boat steady.

The marquis had apparently paused, attracted by the sight of the two girls, splashing away in the water like a couple of mermaids.

Growing bolder upon making the discovery that the waves were not anywhere near as strong in action as usual, the girls ventured into the water until it came well above their waists, and there they frolicked with all the reckless abandonment of youth.

They were about half-way between the two stakes of the life-line, and the Cuban was only some fifty feet from them, swimming in a line with the outer stake.

"Now what is he up to?" the Californian muttered. "What game is he going to play now? Can it be possible that he thinks there is a chance that one of the girls will let go of the life-line so as to give him an opportunity to play the hero and rescue her?"

"It is most unlikely that such an accident should happen, yet from the position that the Cuban has assumed, and the fact that the marquis is waiting beyond him in a boat, it would seem as if they had calculated that some such thing might occur."

Hardly had the Californian finished the speech when shrill screams from the girls rose in the air.

The life-line to which they clung had given way at the shore end and the current swept them off their feet.

They were wise enough though to cling with all their might to the rope, crying at the top of their lungs for help as they were carried away by the tide.

The Cuban was quick to come to their assistance.

He was in such a position that the rope floated right into his grasp and he seized it, calling out to the ladies to keep tight hold, he being only a couple of yards from them.

At the same time the marquis bent lustily to his oars and pulled for the three.

This event created a commotion on the shore, all the bathers and loungers on the sand flocking to the spot.

The Californian followed the example of the rest, but while the others were bestowing their attention on the people in the water, Mackay examined the break in the rope.

The life-line had parted right at the stake, and a moment's inspection convinced the Californian that the line had been cut.

"Oho!" Mackay exclaimed with a chuckle of satisfaction. "Now I understand the game as well as though I had planned it myself! It is as I suspected: these two gentlemen, whose acquaintance I made at the Fifth Avenue Hotel, are confederates of the Cuban.

"The Englishman cut through the life-line so that a few pulls would cause it to part, then the girls' lives would be endangered, and the Cuban could perform a hero's part by rescuing them, aided by the marquis in the boat. Oh, it is a very nice scheme and it is going to work to perfection!"

The Californian was correct in his surmise.

The Cuban swam along the rope until he came to the girls; the boat rowed by the marquis reached the spot almost at the same moment, and amid the shouts of the crowd on the shore the pair were lifted into the craft, where the heiress immediately fainted, but her companion, who was made of stouter stuff, bore up bravely.

The boat was rowed to the shore and a landing effected.

A barouche driven by a coachman happened to be passing along the beach and this was immediately seized upon to convey the ladies to the hotel where every attention was paid them, and under the ministering care of the ladies, who flocked to her assistance, Miss Green soon recovered from the shock.

The Cuban was the lion of the hour, the marquis also coming in for a goodly amount of praise.

Both of the men bore themselves in a modest

and becoming manner, affecting to make light of the circumstances.

The drygoods man, Thompson, was in his glory, and he was never so happy as when there was something going on. He wrung the hands of the Cuban and Frenchman, declared that they were a pair of noble fellows and insisted upon ordering champagne for all present, and if he had had his way would have rewarded the service they had rendered by getting them as drunk as lords.

The Californian kept in the background, but there was not anything that escaped his vigilant eyes. He had taken the measures of the marquis and Englishman at his first meeting with them and was now satisfied that they had come to Long Branch to assist the Cuban in his scheme to entrap the heiress.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CONSPIRATORS.

THE shades of darkness had fallen upon the famous Jersey village, and three men strolling leisurely along, smoking their cigars, on the edge of the bluff which overlooked the beach, entered one of the many little summer-houses which commanded a view of the surf.

It was the night of the day on which the incidents described in our last chapter had taken place.

The three gentlemen are no strangers to our readers, for the trio consisted of Don Pedro Sanches, the Marquis De Neville and the Englishman, Fitzherbert.

It was a lovely night, the moon was rising, and being almost full cast such a flood of silver light that almost all objects were as plainly visible as in the glare of the sunlight.

"There, I think this will answer nicely," the Cuban remarked after the three were seated.

"We can hold a conference here and speak freely without danger of being overheard."

"Yes, it is not possible for any one to play the spy upon us," the Frenchman remarked.

"That is certain," Fitzherbert asserted. "There is no place for any one to conceal themselves in the neighborhood, and no one can approach without our being aware of it."

"That is the reason that I selected the spot," the Cuban remarked. "And there is nothing odd or suspicious either in the fact of our coming here. If we were noticed, no wonder would be excited."

"Oh, no, there isn't any reason why we three should not sit here for a while and enjoy our cigars," the marquis observed.

"It is the most natural thing in the world!" Fitzherbert declared.

"Well, so far our little scheme has worked splendidly," Sanches said. "The lady looks upon me in the light of a hero, and I feel certain that she has the best possible opinion of me."

"The coup was well-planned," the marquis observed, approvingly.

"Yes, and the best thing about the matter is that no one has any suspicion that it was not an accident," Fitzherbert remarked. "The old salt who has charge of the bathing had wit enough to see that the rope had been cut, but he lays the blame upon some children who were playing in the neighborhood of the stake this morning and whom he drove away. He thinks one of the youngsters, boylike, tried the edge of his knife upon the rope, and so when a strain came upon it it broke."

"A very reasonable explanation," the Cuban observed, with a smile. "And now, my dear fellows, I will come to the point. As you have probably guessed, I did not summon you here to exchange congratulations upon the success which has attended our efforts."

The others nodded.

"Nor to make any new plans, for there is not anything to warrant any change in our programme, but I noticed that you were in conversation with a gentleman just after dinner to-day, a young, dashy-looking fellow, a newcomer, about whom there is something that I do not like."

The marquis and the Englishman exchanged glances.

"I suppose you mean this Californian, Mackay," the marquis said.

"Yes, that is the man. I noticed that Thompson had made his acquaintance, and as I felt a curiosity in regard to the party, I inquired concerning him," Sanches replied. "But I noticed that you two were chatting with him as if you were old acquaintances."

"This is not the first time that we have met him," the marquis remarked.

"No, we ran across him at the Fifth Avenue Hotel in the city," the Englishman observed. "And both De Neville and myself took him to be a pigeon who would be well worth the plucking."

The Cuban shook his head.

"You are not of that opinion, eh?" the Frenchman asked.

"No, decidedly not."

"But, as far as we can find out, the fellow is rich—certainly has plenty of money, and is full of sporting blood," the Englishman urged.

"That may be true, but to my thinking the

man is much more likely to turn out to be a hawk than a pigeon!" the Cuban declared.

The others looked astonished at this announcement.

"I know that there isn't anything of the greenhorn about the man," the marquis observed. "In fact I feel sure that he has an extremely good opinion of himself, and my experience is that when you can succeed in catching a man of that kind for a stake it is certain to be a large one."

"I agree with the marquis in that opinion!" the Englishman declared. "And it was our intention to work the game in the most scientific manner possible."

"If you will take my advice you will not attempt to fleece this man for it is my idea that you will catch a Tartar if you try anything of the kind!" the Cuban exclaimed in a most decided way. "To my thinking the man is dangerous," he continued. "There is a peculiar look in his eyes—something about them which reminds me of a snake—something cold, unnatural and not human."

"Well, yes, the man has rather a peculiar pair of eyes," the marquis admitted. "And as you say there is something snake-like about them, but I must confess that the fellow did not impress me as being at all dangerous."

"But the Red Princess got that idea!" Fitzherbert exclaimed, and then he explained how upon making the acquaintance of the Californian they had taken him to the house of the Red Princess and related how unfavorably impressed the lady had been with him.

"Well, it is rather odd that the lady and myself should come to the same conclusion in regard to the matter," the Cuban observed. "And the Red Princess too is a woman for whose judgment I have a great respect."

"It maybe that both Fitzherbert and myself are rather dull of comprehension," the marquis remarked, a trace of sarcasm in his tone, "but, most certainly, neither one of us was impressed with the belief that this Californian was at all dangerous. After making his acquaintance, and pumping him as scientifically as possible, we came to the conclusion that he was one of those self-confident, smart young fellows who thought that he knew a great deal more than he really did, and it was our calculation that if we played our cards carefully we would be able to strike him for a large sum."

"We talked the matter over and carefully considered all the points before we came to this conclusion," Fitzherbert added.

"Well, I do not set myself up for a prophet," the Cuban remarked. "And I must admit that you two ought to know a great deal more about the man than I do. I have merely jumped to a conclusion that the man is dangerous because there is something about him that I do not like, and now that you have told me that the Red Princess was also unfavorably impressed I am strengthened in my belief."

"A dozen times or more I have had presentiments of danger since I began to lead a life of adventure, and I never disregard a presentiment of this sort without being sorry for it," he added.

The others were impressed by this announcement, particularly as they knew that their companion was not the kind of man to give heed to any vague or idle fears.

"What is your idea about the fellow?" the marquis asked, slowly. "Do you think that he is sailing under false colors?"

"Yes, that is my suspicion."

"You think that he is not a Californian?" the Englishman asked.

"That part of his story may be true enough; he may be a Californian, and yet be a bloodhound."

The others gave a slight start, and an anxious look appeared upon their faces.

"Ah! you think he is a detective?" the Frenchman exclaimed.

"I have a presentiment that he is something of the kind," Sanches replied. "Mind you, I have nothing tangible to go upon," he hastened to remark. "I have never spoken to the man, and know nothing about him, excepting that he claims his name to be Thomas Mackay, and that he comes from California. He has assumed this disguise so that his real business will not be suspected."

The others pondered over the matter for a few moments, and then the marquis observed:

"If your suspicion is correct this fellow is about the most dangerous one that we have ever encountered. And the joke of the matter is that he did not seek us out, but we made his acquaintance."

"Exactly! he assumed this character, posing as a rich and verdant Californian, for the express purpose of attracting the attention of men in your line of business. You take him for a prey, make all your arrangements to pluck him, and then, all of a sudden, you will find yourself in a trap, and realize what a mistake you have made."

The faces of the adventurers grew dark, and an ugly look came into their eyes.

"By the eternal powers!" the Frenchman cried, "if I discovered that this was true, I would take measures to put this spy in such a

condition that he would dog no more men to destruction!"

"Yes, that would be the proper course to pursue," the Englishman declared.

"Why not arrange a scheme so as to be able to satisfy our minds in regard to him?" Sanches observed. "We are playing for a big stake here, and we cannot afford to have any mousing detective interfere at the eleventh hour, and bring all our plans to naught."

"Oh, no, rather give the fellow to a dog's death!" the marquis exclaimed, savagely.

"That is the idea!" Fitzherbert declared.

"We must protect ourselves, and if the man is a bloodhound in disguise, there is no question but that it will be necessary to silence him."

"Oh, yes, no doubt about that at all," the Cuban assented. "The only question is whether the fellow is a police spy or not. We must satisfy ourselves on that point before we strike at his life. It may be possible, you know, that I am wrong in my suspicion; if the man is not a bloodhound, it would be a blunder for us to attack him."

"That is true enough," the Frenchman asserted. "But how will we be able to discover the truth?"

"That is a question in regard to which we must set our wits to work," the Cuban replied. "Think the matter over and see if any scheme will suggest itself to either of you."

The faces of the others became grave as, in their minds, they wrestled with the difficult problem.

They pondered over the matter for a few minutes, while Sanches smoked his cigar with the air of a man who was extracting a deal of enjoyment from it, and gazed out to sea, watching the play of the moonbeams upon the rippling water as placidly as though there was not the slightest weight of care upon his mind.

"Well, the only thing I can suggest," the marquis remarked, "would be to place a watch upon the man and see if he communicates with the police authorities in New York. If he is a police spy, he must of course report to the Central Office."

"Have you anything to suggest?" Sanches asked, addressing Fitzherbert.

"No, my ideas about the matter are the same as De Neville's," the Englishman answered.

"I should say put a watch upon the man."

"Well, the trouble in regard to carrying out that scheme is, that it will be a difficult matter to put a spy upon his track without the man being aware of it," the Cuban remarked. "If he is a good detective he will quickly discover that he is being watched, and then, if he is a really first-class man in his business, he will have this matter so arranged that it is not necessary for him to visit Police Headquarters to make his reports; the business will be arranged through third parties, so that even if we were able to shadow him so closely as not to miss one of his movements we would not be able to gain any information connecting him with the police authorities."

The others looked at each other for a moment and then they nodded their heads in token that they did not have anything to offer in opposition to the Cuban's argument.

"Well, gentlemen, what do you think?" Sanches asked after a moment's pause, "am I correct or not?"

"It seems to me that you are right," the Frenchman responded.

"Oh, yes, if this man is an extra good one he will be shrewd enough to keep us from following him so closely as to be able to discover anything of importance," the Englishman observed. "But what is your idea about the matter? I will bet a trifle that you have some scheme in your head!"

"Yes, you are right about that," the Cuban admitted with a quiet smile. "I feel a strong conviction that this man is a bloodhound, and I think the chances are great that he is here on our track, although how the fellow managed to discover that we are up to any scheme is a complete puzzle to me."

"Yes, for there are only a few of us who know the game," De Neville observed.

"True! so few that there is hardly a chance that any one, either by accident or design, could have betrayed the secret."

"Probably it was just by luck that the man ran across us; and he may not be after us at all but on another scent altogether," Fitzherbert suggested.

"Yes, that may be so, but the man's presence here annoys me, and as long as he remains upon the ground there is danger that by some accident he may discover our game," Sanches remarked.

"Oh, it would be a great deal better if he was out of the way!" the Frenchman declared.

"Decidedly so!" Fitzherbert asserted.

"It must be our game to silence him if he is really a bloodhound," the Cuban observed, a dark look upon his swarthy face.

"How is the trick to be worked?" the marquis inquired.

"Well, in the first place, before a decisive blow is struck, we must be sure of our game," the Cuban remarked. "We must be certain that the man is a bloodhound."

"But how can we ascertain the fact?" Fitzherbert asked.

"We must use strategy," Sanches replied.

"By means of a decoy letter we must lure our man to a lonely spot, where we will have a couple of good men in waiting to sand-bag him. After he is knocked insensible he must be put into a carriage and conveyed to the old house which I have secured back in the pines. Under the house is a cellar—a regular sort of pit—access to which is had by a trap-door in the kitchen, and a better place to put a man would be hard to find."

The others nodded their approval of the scheme.

"After we get him into the cellar, and subject him to the pangs of thirst and hunger, it will be strange indeed if I do not succeed in getting the truth out of him."

"Yes, when you come to put the screws on him in that way he will be apt to speak," the Frenchman remarked.

"Then, too, after we get him into our power, a search of his person may furnish some clues in regard to his business," the Englishman suggested.

"It is very likely that in that way we will be able to obtain some information," the Cuban observed. "But if we do not, I am satisfied that when I get the fellow in my power I will be able to force him to tell me who and what he is."

"Now, let me see—about this decoy letter business; I will need a woman to help me carry out the scheme; I suppose your wife could play the part, Fitzherbert, as well as any one I could get."

"Oh, yes, the old woman is a rare hand at any game of this kind. You can depend upon her doing the job up prime!" the Englishman asserted.

"Send for her to come down, and I will summon a couple of men who can do the sand-bag act to the queen's taste," Sanches remarked. "We have acted so promptly in this matter that there is little doubt about our nabbing this bloodhound."

"The fellow will be amazed when he finds that he is in the toils," the marquis remarked, with a grim smile.

"Yes, it will be the old story of the biter bit," Sanches rejoined, rising as he spoke.

The others followed his example.

"We must get back to the hotel," the Cuban continued. "There is going to be a hop tonight, and this pretty million-dollar heiress has promised to give me some dances, and it is my game now to cultivate her acquaintance all that I possibly can. I am after the million, and I am going to have it too if the wit of man can win it!"

The others hastened to assure Sanches that it was their opinion that he would win, and the three passed up the avenue to the hotel, where they found the "hop" in full operation when they arrived.

CHAPTER XVII.

AT THE HOP.

THE three did not enter the ball-room together, for they wished to conceal the fact that they were on intimate terms, but sauntered in one by one.

All three were excellent dancers, and as they had completely deceived their acquaintances in regard to their characters, no one suspecting that they were mere adventurers, they had no difficulty in procuring partners.

Sanches made his way to where the heiress, Miss Green, sat, and, to his annoyance, found her busily engaged in conversation with the young Californian, who had just been introduced by the affable Mr. Thompson, who stood close by, joining in the conversation every now and then.

The Cuban would have retreated when he perceived the Californian, for he felt a strange repugnance toward him, but Thompson caught sight of and beckoned him to approach, at the same time calling Miss Green's attention to his presence.

So, with a smiling face, making a virtue of necessity, he approached the group.

Miss Green received him in the kindest manner, for the girl felt extremely grateful, believing that she owed her life to the Cuban, and her companion, the lively Miss Polly Mathews, who sat by the side of the heiress, also bestowed her sweetest smiles on the gentleman, being fully as grateful as her friend.

Then Thompson, in his fussy, pompous way introduced the Cuban to the Californian.

The young man did not seem to pay any particular attention to the Cuban, merely acknowledging the introduction with a formal bow, and Sanches, perceiving this, took advantage of the fact to make a careful examination of the other.

There was a familiar look to the Californian which gave the Cuban the impression that he had encountered the man before, and yet he could not remember where, or under what circumstances.

This both puzzled and annoyed the Cuban. The only explanation that he could give for his inability to place the stranger, was that the Californian was disguised so that he looked dif-

ferently from what he had when Sanches encountered him in the past.

If this supposition was correct, it showed beyond a doubt that the man was either a detective or an adventurer.

"It is a puzzle, and it angers me that I cannot solve it," Sanches muttered, under his breath. "But I will discover the truth before the world is a week older, or else I am not so shrewd a fellow as I think I am."

The Cuban had arrived too late to secure the heiress's hand for the next dance, she having promised it to the Californian, and so he was obliged to look on and watch her glide through the mazes of the waltz with the man whom he felt that he hated, and for no more cause than a vague suspicion.

Afterward the Cuban managed to secure his share of dances, though, to his disgust, the heiress seemed to be fully as much impressed by the attentions of the Californian as by those which he tendered.

This was as gall and wormwood to the Cuban, but he consoled himself with the thought that in a very short time he would have the other in a position where he would not be able to trouble any one.

After the hop ended the two girls retired to their apartments. The heiress had a parlor with two bedrooms adjoining, but the habits of their early days clung to them, and the two girls occupied one room, giving the other to Miss Green's maid, instead of packing her off to the servants' quarters at the top of the house.

The maid was soon dismissed, and the girls sat down for a quiet, confidential chat.

"Isn't it really lovely this kind of life?" Polly exclaimed. "So different from being obliged to stand behind a counter from eight o'clock in the morning to six at night and wait on a lot of people, half of whom didn't really want anything but came shopping just to pass away the time."

"Oh, yes, this is a change indeed, and I have no doubt that we appreciate the life we are now leading much better than if we had always been used to it. Having once been poor we are able to appreciate riches."

"Yes, yes, that is undoubtedly true, and do you know it sometimes seems all like a dream to me, and the thought comes that I will suddenly wake up and find that it is not real at all."

Katherine laughed at her friend's conceit. "Oh, it is all real enough, and there isn't any danger of such a thing as that happening."

"I know that, of course, but the thought will come, all the same; I always was a goose, you know, always having all sorts of day-dreams," Polly remarked, in the most candid manner.

"Yes, you are about as full of romance as any one I ever met."

"I cannot help it; I was born that way; but, I say, what a perfectly splendid time we had to-night. I don't think I ever enjoyed myself as well before."

"Yes, it was very enjoyable."

"And to think too that we came so near to leaving this bright and beautiful world to-day; it fairly makes me shudder when I think of it!" and a shiver shook the plump form of the girl as she spoke.

"Yes, we were extremely near to death," the heiress remarked, slowly, her face grave and thoughtful.

"And how brave and noble it was of this Cuban gentleman to come so promptly to our rescue!"

"Oh, yes, we owe him a debt of gratitude which we can hardly ever hope to pay."

"Well, I guess that if you asked him about the matter he could suggest a way in which you could cancel the debt!" the other exclaimed, with a roguish smile.

A slight blush rose on Katherine's pale cheeks.

"How you talk!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, it is the truth, and I guess you know it too!" Polly retorted. "Any one with half an eye can see that the gentleman has fallen over head and ears in love with you."

"Nonsense!" cried the heiress, blushing still deeper.

"Oh, no, it is not nonsense!" the other persisted. "Why, you were the only girl in the room that he seemed to care to dance with, and he did not like it at all either when you danced with that Mr. Mackay. I watched him and could plainly see that he was jealous."

"He had no cause to be I am sure, for Mr. Mackay did not pay me any particular attention."

"Yes, I know that, but when a man falls in love with a girl you know he doesn't like to see any other gentleman pay her the slightest attention. I don't wonder either that he is jealous, for I think Mr. Mackay is perfectly splendid, but then I have always heard that the Californians were real nice, and I really think of the two that I should prefer Mr. Mackay to the Cuban, although they say that Mr. Sanches is awfully rich, but that does not matter to you, of course, for you have plenty of money of your own and could afford to marry a poor man if you took a fancy to him."

"Yes, that is true, and there comes in one of the disadvantages attending the possession of wealth," the heiress remarked. "How can I tell

whether my suitor is attracted by me or by the money that I possess?"

"Well, I don't know," Polly replied with a shake of the head. "I suppose that it is a hard matter to decide—that is if the gentleman is not wealthy. If he had plenty of money he would not be apt to be a fortune-hunter, although I don't really know that that is so, for I have heard it said that with some men the more money they have the more money they want."

"Yes, I presume that is often the case, but, really, I have a better opinion of both Mr. Mackay and the Cuban than to suppose that either one of them is a fortune-hunter."

"Oh, so have I!" the other exclaimed. "I believe both of them are attracted by yourself and not by your money, and now, honestly, Kate which one of the two do you like best?"

"Oh, I don't know; it is too soon yet to put that question; you must give me time to make up my mind. Mr. Sanches is evidently a polished and cultivated gentleman, while the Californian has an odd, off-hand way with him that is strangely attractive, and then too, there is something about him which is extremely familiar to me, so much so, that I sometimes wonder if I have not met him before."

"That certainly is very strange!" the other exclaimed.

"Yes it is, and I cannot account for it."

"Do you really think that you have met Mr. Mackay before?"

"Well, no, I cannot say that I feel at all certain about it, for I can not recall the circumstance, it seems vague and unsubstantial like a dream."

"But the fact leads you to take a greater interest in him than you would otherwise," Polly observed, shrewdly.

"Yes, I suppose it does," the heiress admitted.

"I confess I think that if I were in your place I should prefer the Californian," Polly observed, after meditating over the matter for a few moments. "Mr. Sanches is a foreigner, and it doesn't really seem right for us American girls to marry men who come from other countries, for there is no telling but they may have wives at home."

The heiress laughed at this notion and then the two prepared to retire for the night.

"Maybe your dreams will tell you which one is the best man," Polly suggested as the pair sought their pillows.

"Perhaps so," Katherine replied, and then silence reigned.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE LETTER.

THREE days passed away since the one on which the Cuban played the part of a guardian angel, and nothing of any moment concerning the characters in our story happened.

Life at Long Branch went on in the usual fashion common to all watering places.

The gossips noted that Mr. Sanches paid particular attention to the young heiress, whose life he had the credit of saving, and the report soon got around that it was likely there would be an engagement between them; it was also noted that Miss Green seemed to be partial to the society of the young Californian, but as he seemed to pay fully as much attention to Miss Mathews as to the heiress, the scandal-mongers did not think that he would prove a dangerous rival to the Cuban.

Mackay had visited the city once during the three days, and had taken particular care to ascertain if he was followed or watched, but, as far as he could see, no one was on his track.

"That is good," he soliloquized. "It shows that my mission has not been suspected. I did not think that it would be, for I am satisfied that my disguise is perfect; still, from the peculiar way in which this supposed Cuban acts toward me, I got the idea that his suspicions were excited, and, of course, I jumped at once to the conclusion that he believed me to be a police spy. It is much more probable though, that he is alarmed for fear I will interfere with his designs upon the heiress. Being a rascal himself, he may have got the notion into his head that I am a fortune-hunter, and hope to make a prey of the girl. That is the most likely solution of the mystery."

Notwithstanding that he had come to this opinion, the spy did not fail to keep on the watch, ready to detect the slightest suspicious circumstance.

Dinner was over, and the Californian passed through the office on his way to the piazza to enjoy a smoke, when the hotel clerk beckoned to him and held up a letter.

"For me?" asked the Californian, as he approached, rather surprised, for he knew of no one who would be apt to write to him.

"Yes, sir, Thomas Mackay, Esquire, and in a lady's hand," the clerk replied, with a knowing smile.

"Ah, yes, I reckon it is for me then," the Californian replied, smiling in response to the clerk's grin.

Turning away he opened the note, which was a dainty affair, elaborately scented.

It was written in a pretty, feminine hand, and ran as follows:

"THOMAS MACKAY, ESQUIRE:—

"DEAR SIR:—Please forgive the liberty which I have taken in thus addressing you, a stranger, but I wish to see you on a business matter of importance both to you and myself. If you will kindly come to Cedar avenue to-night at nine o'clock, I will be waiting in a carriage on the corner of the second street from Ocean avenue on the left hand side.

"I will not detain you more than ten minutes, and I pray you to come, for I have a disclosure to make which, I feel sure, is of great importance.

"(Signed), VERITAS."

The Californian read the letter over twice, then folded it up, put it in his pocket, and sauntered to the piazza, where he procured a chair in a quiet nook, and, after lighting a cigarette, fell to meditating in regard to the mysterious communication.

"Now then, what does this mean?" he mused. "Is it a trick—does it conceal a trap?" And for a good five minutes he smoked in silence, debating the question in his mind.

"At the first glance it appears as if it did," he mused. "But then comes the question—if it is a trap, who set it, and for what purpose? Is my errand here suspected—is the Cuban, or his pals, at the bottom of this?"

"No, no," he continued, after a long pause, "it does not seem possible that it can be so. I have not left a single point unguarded; not a thing has taken place which would be apt to rouse suspicion in the breast of any one. It is hardly possible that this gang have intuitively hit upon the truth.

"Is it not more probable that this is some outside matter? Perhaps some woman here suspects that the Cuban and I are rivals and wishes to give me some warning concerning him. Yes, that seems to me to be more like the truth.

"I will risk it and go, anyway!"

"Cedar avenue, at the corner of the second street, at nine o'clock," he mused. "That is not a very lonely situation. I will have my revolver in my hand, and if there is any trap about the matter the fellows will have to be pretty smart to catch me in it."

Having come to this determination, after finishing his cigarette, the Californian went up to his room and made preparations for the adventure.

First he examined his revolvers and made sure that they were in perfect working order, and then inspected each cartridge, taking care to recharge the pistols, so as to be sure that they were none of them defective.

"A clogging cylinder and a bad cartridge has cost many a good man his life," the Californian muttered.

After satisfying himself that his weapons were in perfect order, he put on a plain, dark suit, stowed one revolver away in the pocket on the right-hand side—it was a sack coat—and put the other down in a pocket suspended from the waistband of his pantaloons, so arranged that by thrusting his hand in between his vest and pantaloons he could grasp the butt of the pistol with his left hand. There was a similar pocket on the right-hand side, but on this occasion he preferred to carry the revolver in his coat pocket.

It was in the gloom of the twilight that these preparations were made, and it was almost dark as the Californian came out of his room and descended to the piazza.

Looking at the clock as he passed through the office, he saw that it lacked a few minutes of eight.

"If I start away from here about twenty minutes before nine I shall have ample time," he soliloquized. "I don't exactly remember how far up the second street is, although I drove through Cedar avenue only yesterday, but it cannot be over half a mile or so, and it will not take me long to walk it.

"And now, it seems to me that I ought to find out what the Cuban and his pals are doing. If this is a trap, and they are concerned in it, the chances are great that they will be somewhere in the neighborhood of the meeting-place, waiting for my coming."

But when the Californian stepped out on the piazza he saw the Cuban and the marquis in a group which surrounded Miss Green and three other ladies, who were holding a sort of a levee at the extreme end of the balcony.

"Well, there are two of them at all events," the spy muttered, when he made this discovery.

A few minutes later he saw the Englishman chatting with a group of gentlemen in the saloon of the hotel.

"There is the third one, and apparently none of the three has any idea of taking a walk, so I reckon it is all right—no trap after all."

The Californian sauntered around the hotel until the hands of the clock pointed to twenty minutes of nine, and then he started to keep the appointment made by his unknown correspondent.

CHAPTER XIX.

ENTRAPPED.

THE night was not dark, for the moon was rising, so the Californian had plenty of light to see where he was going.

He walked on without hurrying for he knew he had ample time.

There were plenty of people, walking and

driving, on the main avenues, but after he got well up the side street not many did he encounter.

It took him about fifteen minutes he reach the place of appointment, for he had walked slowly, keeping a good watch on his surroundings as he progressed.

He had an idea that he might be followed from the hotel, but although he took particular pains to ascertain whether this was so or not, no spy could he discovered.

As he came near the meeting-place he saw an old-fashioned carryall standing on the corner; the horse's head was toward him and he could make out that a female figure sat on the front seat and held the reins.

"Well, this seems to be all right," he soliloquized as he approached. "I do not see anything wrong about this. I reckon that my suspicions were at fault and that it is not a trap after all."

The Californian had his revolver drawn and he held it in his right hand, but pressed against his side in such a way that the weapon could not be distinguished; when he saw that there was only a woman in the carriage he stowed the pistol away in his pocket.

"I am ever so much obliged to you for coming!" the woman exclaimed, in a voice the accent of which plainly betrayed that she was English as the Californian came up to the carriage.

"Don't mention it, madam, I am glad to be able to oblige you," the Californian replied, with a polite bow.

"Will you have the kindness to get in and ride a little ways with me?" the woman asked. "I will drive slowly and we will be able to converse without danger of any one overhearing what we say. I have something of the utmost importance to communicate to you."

"Oh, yes, anything to oblige."

The woman was rather good-looking, and evidently a lady; was dressed nicely, and though she seemed nervous and agitated, that was only natural under the circumstances.

The Californian approached the carriage and placed his foot upon the step to enter.

Then from a clump of bushes, right at his back, came two men.

They advanced with a rush. The Californian, warned by the sound of the footsteps that danger was near, turned in alarm and endeavored to draw his revolver, but his assailants were too near and came on too quickly.

Before he could get the weapon out the foremost man of the two dealt the Californian a violent blow upon the head with a short club which he carried.

The assailed man perceived the movement and threw up his left hand to ward off the stroke, while he tried to get his revolver out with the other.

He was not quick enough to parry the blow, and the force of the stroke beat him down insensible to the earth.

"That was a dandy lick, Red Murphy!" the second man of the two cried in a sharp, shrill voice, the tone of which plainly betrayed that he was not an American.

"Oh, you can jest bet yer boots that I know my little biz!" the man with the club replied.

"When I sail in to lay a feller out, I lay him out for keeps, and don't you forget it!"

"Do not waste any time in idle boasting!" the woman cried in a tone of authority. "Some carriage is liable to come along at any moment and then an inquiry into this matter might be made which would be awkward for us."

"Oh, no," the short, thick-set fellow with the club answered.

"I know a leetle game which can be played in a case of that kind. This is a pal of ours who got so drunk down at the shore that he is completely paralyzed and we are trying to get him home. That is a good enough yarn, you know, to stuff almost anybody, and mighty few folks are anxious to interfere in what don't concern them."

"That is true, but there is no sense in running any risk when it can be avoided just as well as not," the woman declared.

"Right you are!" exclaimed the tall, thin man with the harsh voice. "Always try to keep on the safe side, that is my motto! Give me a hand, Murphy, and we will put our man in the back of the carriage."

"All right," the other answered. Then he put his club in his pocket—this club, by the way, was a curious article, for it was not a wooden weapon, but made out of cloth, looking more like a big sausage than anything else; it was the weapon which the ruffian of the West has borrowed from the heathen scoundrel of the far East, the sand-club, which does both noiseless and effective work.

The two men took hold of the insensible Californian and put him in the back of the carriage; the tall, thin man got in by his side, and the short, thick-set fellow took a seat by the driver.

The woman started the horse, turned the carriage around and drove up Cedar avenue until she came to a small cross-road, on the left, at the upper end of the street; into this road she turned and forced the horse on at a good pace southward.

After getting into the narrow road, upon

which the houses were few and far between, the woman spoke. There had been no word exchanged between the three on the avenue.

"How is the man, Rodney?" she asked.

"All right!"

"Is there any sign of his recovering his senses?"

"Not yet!"

"Oh, he is all right for a good half-hour!" the short, thick-set man, who had been addressed as Red Murphy, observed.

This Red Murphy was an old New York jailbird, and bore the reputation among the police of being one of the most desperate and dangerous of all the criminals of the city.

"You can bet yer sweet life that when I crack a feller over the noddle with my little joker that he will not trouble anybody for a while," he continued. "I allers prides myself upon doing my work up to the handle. When Red Murphy does a job you can bet all you are worth that it is going to be done to the queen's taste, and don't you forget it!"

"Are you all prepared in case he does recover?" the woman asked.

"Oh, yes; I have the chloroform and sponge ready and the moment he stirs I will give him a dose which will be apt to set him off again so you need not be afraid of his making any trouble."

"Better let me give him another rap on the head with my little joker!" Red Murphy exclaimed with a grin. "I will back my club ag'in' chloroform to put a man to sleep any day in the week!"

"One of these days you will hit a man harder than you intend, and then you will be apt to get into trouble," the woman warned.

"Oh, I am not afraid!" Red Murphy exclaimed, contemptuously. "The prison is not built that can hold me!" he continued, boastfully.

"That may be, but if you will take my advice you will not take any chances," the thin man with the harsh voice continued. "The smartest man slips up sometimes, and the best way is to avoid all the scrapes that you possibly can."

By this time the carriage had turned off the main road into a small side one running to the west and was now in the heart of the lonely region locally known as "The Pines," on account of the vast number of pine trees amid which the road ran, twisting around, first to the right and then to the left, as though it was following a serpent's irregular trail.

Here and there, at long distances apart, were clearings where some settler—generally a negro—was attempting to wring a living from the sterile soil.

At last the carriage left the road and turning to the left, followed a narrow path, just big enough to allow the vehicle to pass, and then came to a halt before a small house which stood in the center of a half-acre of cleared land.

The woman and men descended from the carriage, and while the female unlocked the door the men took the helpless Californian from the vehicle, and when the portal was open, carried him into the house and down to the cellar, where in utter darkness he was left.

CHAPTER XX.

IN THE CELLAR.

THE senses of the Californian had been slowly coming back to him, and the cool, damp air of the underground apartment aided his recovery; within ten minutes after being placed in the cellar he had recovered sufficiently to sit up and look around him.

Of little avail, though, were his eyes, for the darkness was so intense that he could not distinguish a single object, but the damp atmosphere and the closeness of the air made him suspect that he was in a cellar.

"Well, I have got a lesson this time which ought to take some of the conceit out of me," he muttered, after his mind got in good working order again, and he fell to reflecting upon the situation.

"I suspected, right at the beginning, that it was a trap, and then I was fool enough to allow myself to be caught in it, walking into the snare as blindly as any unsuspecting greenhorn could have done. 'There is a fall to proud ambition!' he exclaimed, sarcastically. "It is plain now that I am not half so smart as I thought I was. But now the question comes up: what is the little game, anyway?"

And for a good ten minutes the prisoner meditated over this matter; then he shook his head, and again soliloquized:

"I am afraid I shall have to give it up. I am in a trap, sure enough; there is not any doubt about that, but why I have been entrapped—who are my entrappers, and what object the parties had in putting up this job on me is a mystery."

Then the Californian chanced to put his hand into his pocket, and discovered that his revolver was gone.

"Hello! somebody has been through me, I reckon!" he exclaimed.

An examination disclosed that the suspicion was correct.

His watch, wallet, even his penknife had been

taken, nor had the searches failed to find the second revolver concealed in the secret pocket.

"Well, I must say that they have made a clean sweep of it!" he muttered. "Can it be that I have been assailed merely so that I might be robbed?"

But the Californian dismissed this conjecture as being unworthy of belief almost immediately.

"Oh, no, if I had been assaulted merely for the purpose of robbery, the scoundrels would have stripped me of my valuables after I was stricken down, and they would not have taken the trouble to bring me here and imprison me in a cellar."

"It seems more likely that this party, upon whose track I am, has in some way got a suspicion that I was playing the spy upon him, and this little move has been made by him, but if he calculated upon discovering any documents upon my person which would give the snap away, to use the vulgate, he must have been woefully disappointed."

By this time the dazed feeling had passed away, and the Californian was like himself again.

He rose to his feet, and began a careful survey of his prison house, feeling his way through the darkness.

As nearly as he could make out he was in a common cellar with stone walls, almost twelve feet square, with a door at one end.

The door was stoutly constructed, for although the Californian tried his utmost strength upon it he was not able to move it in the least.

"Well, I am in for it, and no mistake!" the prisoner muttered, when he completed his investigation. "And all I can do is to sit down and wait patiently until my captors see fit to make an explanation."

In the course of his investigation the Californian had found a small box, and this he took for a seat.

Placing it in an angle of the wall so he could have a rest for his back, he sat down and proceeded to make himself as comfortable as possible.

That the prisoner was a rather uncommon sort of fellow was soon apparent, for, despite his position, and the anxiety which it ought to have caused him, he closed his eyes and in a short time was fast asleep, slumbering away as calmly as though he was in his comfortable bed at the hotel.

He slept as sleeps the just for some thirty minutes, and then he suddenly awakened; like a cat he seemed to possess the faculty of falling to sleep and waking up at a moment's notice.

It was a slight noise at the door which had awakened the sleeper, and just as he opened his eyes and sat upright, the door opened and the rays of a lantern flashed into the cellar.

The Californian sat at the opposite end of the cellar to where the door was situated, so that the length of the apartment intervened between him and the door.

In the doorway stood a man clad in a complete suit of blue overalls, jacket and pantaloons, so that he looked like a workingman, but over his head was drawn a hood of the same material, with eye and mouth holes in it, forming a complete disguise for the head and face.

In one hand this man held a common tubular lantern and in the other a bowie-knife gleamed.

Behind him, in the entrance, stood two more men dressed in a similar disguise, and both armed with revolvers, which they flourished, menacingly, in the air.

The first man advanced into the room and hung the lantern upon a hook in the ceiling so that it lighted up the apartment.

The Californian did not rise from his box, but remained seated and gazed at the disguised men with as calm a face, and as much unconcern, as though all this was a mere every-day occurrence.

"Well, how do you find yourself?" the leader of the masked men asked when he gained the center of the apartment, where he halted and surveyed the prisoner, his eyes shining darkly through the holes in the hood.

The man spoke in a hoarse voice, evidently assumed to disguise his real tones, but the Californian, listening intently, came to the conclusion that the owner of the voice was no stranger to him.

"Oh, I am pretty well, thank you; nothing to complain of just now, although the rap on the head that I got bothered me a little while ago," the prisoner answered, in a brisk, businesslike tone. "Still, under the circumstances, I don't suppose I ought to complain," he continued. "All things considered, I reckon I got off pretty easily."

"You are a cool hand, I must say!" the masked leader exclaimed, considerably astonished by the way in which the prisoner was carrying himself.

"Well, I always reckon to take things as easy as I can, no matter what turns up," the Californian replied. "This is not the first time that I have been in a snap of this kind," he continued. "I have been 'held up' by road-agents in the Pacific Slope a half a dozen times, but I must admit that the scientific manner in which you fellows worked this job is a little

ahead of anything that I ever struck, and I have been held up by some good men, too, fellows who thought they were away at the top of the heap," the Californian added in a reflective way.

"We are much obliged to you for the compliment," the other replied. "We Eastern men generally do our work up in good shape."

"You bet!" the prisoner cried, emphatically. "I can bear witness to that."

"But we are wasting time!" the masked man exclaimed, abruptly. "We did not come here to be complimented by you upon the excellence of our work. We have other business on hand."

"Fire away!" the Californian exclaimed. "I am in a condition just now to listen to anything that you have got to say; but I can tell you one thing, and that right at the beginning: if you calculate to make anything more out of me, the trick will not work!"

"Is that so?" inquired the masked man, in a decidedly sarcastic tone.

"Just as sure as that you are standing there, my friend," the prisoner declared in the most positive way. "You have stripped me clean—got away with all my wealth, and I reckon you ought to be satisfied."

"That is your opinion, eh?" the masked man inquired.

"Yes, sir, that is my platform!"

"We cannot play any little game with you?"

"No, sir, not by a jugful!"

"What do you suppose our game is?"

"Well, I haven't bothered my head much about that—haven't really had time, you know," the prisoner remarked. "Then too, I am a stranger here in the East, and am not posted as to how you gentlemen in this line of business run your games. If we were in California now, I might be able to give a pretty good guess at your little scheme."

"Imagine that we are in California and go ahead!" exclaimed the disguised ruffian.

"Well, when our road-agents go through a man—take all his wealth away, and then take the man himself, they do it so as to be able to get a ransom for him," the prisoner explained. "They lug the game off to some secure spot, and then have him send word to his friends that he is in a tight place, and that they must pony up so much wealth before they will be gladdened by a sight of his countenance again."

"And you have jumped to the conclusion that that is the game we think of playing?" the masked man asked.

"I don't see what other scheme you can have in view; but I can tell you, right plainly, that it will not work, for I have no friends who will put up any wealth to get me out of this, if you keep me here until doomsday."

"Why, I thought you were a rich man?"

"So I am—in expectation, but my wealth has not panned out yet," the Californian answered, with the true, reckless bravado of the adventurer. "You must give me time to breathe; strike me some ten or fifteen years from now, and the chances are big that I will pan out in the richest kind of way—yield a tremendous dividend, you know—but at present I am N. G. Excuse my dipping into slang, but the occasion demands it."

"You are an extremely smart young man!" the other declared, in a very sarcastic tone.

"Much obliged for the compliment, and since the game is running that way, allow me to observe that the manner in which you managed this trick shows that you are away up at the top of the heap yourself," the Californian replied, apparently taking the words of the other with the utmost good faith.

"But, smart as you are, you cannot deceive me," the masked man declared.

A look of surprise appeared on the face of the Californian.

"Oh, come now, who is trying to do that?" he exclaimed.

"You are!"

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes!"

"Honor bright, now! I am acting in the squarest manner toward you," the prisoner declared. "And under the circumstances, how on earth could I deceive you, even if I wanted to? It is the truth that I am telling you that I am not well fixed enough to be able to pay a ransom, and true, too, that I haven't any wealthy friends who would be willing to put up for me."

"How about the chief of police?" asked the disguised man, abruptly.

A puzzled look appeared on the face of the prisoner.

"The chief of police?" he cried, in a tone of question.

"Yes, that is what I said," the other exclaimed, harshly. "He is a good friend of yours, isn't he?"

"Well, no, not to my knowledge; but I say, what on earth are you driving at?"

"Don't you understand that we are onto your little game?"

"Maybe you are," the prisoner responded, a bewildered look upon his face, "but if it is so I will be hanged if you don't know more than I do, for I am not onto it myself!"

"You are no Californian!"

"Oh, ain't I?"

"No more than I am!"

"Well, as I haven't had the pleasure of being introduced to you, I cannot say in regard to that."

"You are a police spy."

"Is that so?" And now the tone of the young man was jeering in the extreme.

"Yes, you are here in disguise, and have been sent to play a certain game."

"I see that you know all about it!" the other exclaimed, sarcastically. "You and the chief of the New York police are old pals, I suppose?"

"Now, while I have a pretty clear idea in regard to what the game is, yet I desire to hear all the particulars from your lips."

"Oh, yes, of course," and the Californian laughed sarcastically. "I am in a tight place now, and I will be glad to tell you all I know. All you have to do is to question, and I will answer."

The eyes of the disguised man flashed fire through the holes of his mask.

There was no mistaking the tone of defiance in which the Californian spoke.

"Oho, you are going to brave my power then?" he exclaimed, angrily. "Perhaps you think I will not be able to find a way to make you speak?"

"Well, I am certain that you will not be able to make me tell you what I do not know," the prisoner replied.

"Ah, you think that you do not know now, but after a while you may come to the conclusion that you do," the masked man said, sneeringly.

"Maybe I will, but I doubt it."

"Hunger and thirst are sometimes powerful assistants to a man's memory," the other remarked slowly, and placing strong emphasis on the words.

"Possibly, but I doubt if either hunger or thirst will work in this case," the Californian replied in a decided tone.

"Well, it will not do any harm to try. You see it is my impression that you are playing possum. I believe that you are a police spy and that you have come to Long Branch on a secret mission; I am a perfect slave to curiosity and therefore I have made up my mind to find out just what business has brought you down here."

"And so you laid this trap for me!" the prisoner exclaimed.

"Yes, and now that you are in my power I shall try to make you speak! As I said, hunger and thirst are powerful agents, and you will soon be introduced to both of them, for until you make up your mind to make a clean breast of it neither food nor drink shall pass your lips."

"Oh, and you think that sort of treatment will be apt to make me speak?" the Californian exclaimed with scornful accent.

"If it does not you must be more than man," was the reply.

"Well, I reckon that you will find that I am about as tough as they make them!" the prisoner asserted.

"Yes, but I doubt if you are tough enough to endure the torture to which I am going to subject you," the masked man replied. "From now until to-morrow noon neither bite nor sup shall you have. Then I will come again and give you another chance. Perhaps by that time you may have come to the conclusion to give me the information I desire."

"My reply then will be just the same as it is now. You are barking up the wrong tree; I cannot tell you what I don't know!" the Californian exclaimed.

"If you stick to that story after you have been here without food or drink for three or four days I shall begin to believe that I am wrong in my conjecture."

Then the speaker took the lantern and retreated to the door.

"You will have some time to reflect before you see me again," he said. "You had best submit with a good grace for if you are obstinate you are doomed!"

Then he passed through the portal, the door closed and the Californian was left amid the gloom to meditate upon the situation.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SPIDER.

FOR a good fifteen minutes the Californian neither stirred nor spoke; he was reflecting upon what had occurred, then his meditation flowed into words.

Like all people of a solitary nature the Californian was accustomed to debate aloud in regard to the situation, talking to himself, just as an ordinary man talks to a friend.

"I am in a tight place here and no mistake," he soliloquized, speaking in a low and guarded tone for fear that there might be some contrivance by means of which the ruffians who had captured him could overhear his words if he spoke in his ordinary tone of voice.

"I have been successful in my quest though, I am sure; there is hardly a doubt that I have fallen into the power of the gang who wear the brand of the Invisible Hand."

"All the circumstances go to show that this band is a powerful and well organized one. The Cuban, Sanches—or he who passes as such, for I have a suspicion that he is no more a Cuban than I am—is one of the band. I am certain of that, for Cuban Kate gave me the information, little thinking how important was the revelation that she was making or how great the secret she was betraying."

"These adventurers, the Frenchman and the Englishman, are pals of the Cuban undoubtedly, and they too are members of the band."

"The gang is led with amazing skill too; the best proof of that is the fact that suspicion has been excited in regard to myself, and when I come to think it over I am decidedly puzzled to account for it."

"Can it be possible that he is an old acquaintance, and is so skillfully disguised that I can not recognize him, and so has a suspicion that I am not what I appear to be?"

After meditating over the matter for a few moments the prisoner shook his head.

"It is certain that if the man is an old acquaintance he has not fully recognized me, or else I would meet with different treatment. And I, on my part, although he seems familiar to me, am not able to place him."

"As nearly as I can make out he more resembles the chief of the Invisible Hand band, the Englishman, Brakespear, whom I hunted down, and who escaped from justice by committing suicide, than anybody else."

"If the statement that the murdered ruffian made to me that Brakespear was alive—that his supposed death was only a clever trick to escape from the hands of the law—if that statement was true—and the man certainly made it as though he firmly believed that it was—then this Cuban, Sanches, is the Englishman, Brakespear, and if I succeed in escaping from this trap I stand a good chance of nabbing him. If I get the bracelets on him again I will take good care that there will be no poison business worked."

"Before I boast though of what I will do, I had better set my wits to work to get out of this or my career as a police spy will come to an untimely end."

By this time the Californian's eyes had become so accustomed to the darkness that he was able to distinguish the outlines of the walls.

Rising to his feet he made a complete circuit of the cellar, tapping carefully on each stone, hoping to find some one that was loose so that he could remove it and tunnel out, but considering that he had absolutely nothing whatever in the way of a tool to aid him, even if he had found a loose stone, he would have had considerable of a job to dig the tunnel.

"I am caught here and caged like a rat in a trap!" the Californian exclaimed, as he renewed his seat upon the box, for the first time betraying signs of annoyance.

"It really appears as if there wasn't any chance for me to escape, and so I suppose I am in for a taste of how hunger and thirst feels."

"The fellow is to come at noon to-morrow," he mused. "By that time I reckon I will be in such a state of mind that I will not care very much whether I live or die."

"I will try a bit of strategy—I will go down on my knees, pretending to be half-crazed by the terrors of my solitary confinement, beg in the most pitiful manner to be released, and then, just as soon as my man is off his guard I will spring at his throat like a wildcat, at the same time knocking down the lantern, and as it is likely to be extinguished by the fall, in the darkness the men with the revolvers will not be able to do much damage."

"They will hardly dare to fire anyway for fear of killing their leader, for if they blaze away they will be just as likely to hit him as to wound me."

"It is a desperate chance but it is all that is left to me and I will risk it!"

Having come to this conclusion the prisoner leaned back against the wall and prepared to go to sleep, disposed to make the best of the situation.

He closed his eyes and was just beginning to get drowsy when he became conscious that there was a current of cold air streaming into the cellar.

"Somebody has left the gate open and I will catch cold," the Californian muttered, the old joke about the man who slept in the park and complained of the draft of air from an open gate coming to his mind.

The prisoner straightened up and looked around him.

At first he was inclined to believe that his imagination had deceived him, but after a few moments he became satisfied that it was not so.

There was a current of cold air coming into the cellar, and the place where it entered was in his immediate neighborhood too.

"Well, this is extremely strange," he murmured, and while he pondered over the circumstance he was surprised by a question addressed to him by a voice which seemed to come out of the wall.

"Hey, boss, how is yer?"

The voice was low and cautious, and spoke in a shrill falsetto, and from the peculiar tone the

Californian conjectured that it was a negro boy who spoke.

New hope sprung up in the heart of the prisoner, for he immediately jumped to the conclusion that the speaker would be much more likely to turn out to be a friend than an enemy.

"Well, I am all right now, although I am in a pretty tight place here," he replied.

"Yes, sah, you done bet yer life dat you is!" the voice asserted in a tone of conviction.

"I say, where are you?"

"I se hyer, sah, close to de corner, dar's one of de stones which am flat, an' fixed so it kin be used as a door."

"Oh, there is?" exclaimed the prisoner, feeling as if the information had bestowed new life upon him.

"Yes, sah, dat's so!"

"Well, I am very glad to hear it, for I suppose it will give me a chance to get out of this hole that I am in."

"You kin jes' bet on dat, boss!" the voice declared. "I se been done keeping my eyes on de men w'ot hab taken de ole house ebber since dey come hyer."

"Who are you, anyway?" the Californian asked.

"I se de Spider."

"The Spider?"

"Yes, sah, dat's my name."

"What else besides the Spider?"

"Deed, sah, dat's all—dat's all de name dat I ever hab."

"How comes it that you are lurking around this old house?"

"I was born hyer, sah!"

"Oh, you were?"

"Yes, sah, my fadder used for to own it, an' dat's de reason why I know 'bout dis yere way into de cellar, an' a heap of odder t'ings 'bout de ole place."

"Ah, yes, I see; and who was your father?"

"He was a colored man, sah, named Jackson, Brazil Jackson. He use for to be a big man down hyer in de Pines once."

"Big in what way?"

"Why, he was de capt'in ob de biggest gang ob thieves dat dere was in de country!" the boy exclaimed, with a great deal of pride.

"Ah, yes, I see."

"You kin bet yer life, massa, dat he was a hummer, an' no mistake. All de way from Farmingdale up to Freehold and Keyport he used for to make de grand razzoos! I tell you, sah, de ole man got away wid a heap ob plunder in his time!"

"And where is he now?"

"He is done gone dead, sah; he was shot one night by de jailer when he was tryin' to break out ob de jail at Freehold, where dey had him caged."

"Well, that ought to have been a warning to you?"

"Deed it was, sah; I ain't done no crooked work since, 'cept to help myself to a few 'taters or some odder garden truck, or to a chicken when I was short on de grub question," the boy replied.

"I suppose your father used this place for a headquarters?"

"Yes, sah, dat is de truth. It is 'way in de middle ob de Pines; 'bout t'ree miles from hyer to Long Branch, sah, an' nobody eber comes by de road through de Pines but de colored folks, who hab houses up dis way, or people dat done lose dere way."

"It seems to me that the house was well situated to afford protection to a gang such as your father was at the head of," the Californian observed.

"Yes, sah, de thing use for to work fu'st rate," the boy asserted. "De ole man an' de gang would run de plunder in hyer an' hide it in dis cellar. When you are up stairs, or outside ob de house, dere's no signs dat dere's any cellar at all; an' den dis hyer passageway, which leads from de cellar to de ole barn at de back ob de house, was fixed so dat if de officers come, de men dat was in de house could scoot down inter de cellar, an' den if de peelers found out 'bout de cellar, an' went for to break a way into it, de gang could git out by way ob dis hyer passage to de ole barn, an' den make a break for de Pines."

"Yes, I see; your father had the matter nicely arranged. But, I say, how comes it that these fellows who have put me here do not know about this secret passage as long as they are posted in regard to the cellar?"

"Cos my fadder nebber let anybody know 'bout dis hyer passage; dat was a trick dat he kept to himself," the other replied. "I was the only one dat knew anyt'ing 'bout it, an' dat was 'cos I helped him to dig it."

"Ah, yes; but how is it that this gang who entrapped me have taken possession of the place, and how does it happen that they know of the existence of the cellar?" the Californian asked, eager to gain all possible information.

"Dat is through my uncle, Monkey Bill," the boy explained.

"And who is Monkey Bill?"

"He's my fadder's brudder. He used to belong to de gang dat my fadder ran, but when de officers b'usted de gang up, Monkey Bill went to New York an' got a situation wid a doctor dere dat

he use to help dig roots down hyer in de swamps.

"De doctor is a Jew, an' he ain't no better dan he ought to be, either!" the boy asserted. "Monkey Bill got me a place wid him, but I didn't like de job an' cle'ed out. De ole Jew and Monkey thought I was pokin' my nose into dere business, an' dey give me a couple of awful hidings, an' you kin jes' bet, boss, I didn't wait for to git any more, but jes' cut my lucky."

"You had this old house to come to so you were not without shelter."

"Dat's so, an' I knew I could pick up a living, 'cos I se handy 'bout bosses, an' dere's allers a job 'round Long Branch in de season."

"Did you find this gang in possession of the house when you came?"

"No, sah, dey only put in an appearance three days ago. I happened to be hyer at de time. I had same trouble with a colored man ober in Eatontown dat I was workin' for; de ole coon swore dat I had been stealin' out ob his house, but it wasn't so, it was his own brack moke what had swiped de t'ings, but he laid it on mo 'case I was Brazil Jackson's son, an' when I up an' tole him dat it was his boy dat had collared de ducats he started for de officers an' allowed dat he would send up to Freehold, so I jest made tracks for de Pines."

"Quite natural under the circumstances," the Californian observed.

"I was in de barn when I heered dis yere gang comin', an' you jes' bet yer life, boss, I t'ought it was de officers arter me, so I scooted down inter dis yere secret passage, but I kept near de opening so I could heer w'ot dey were sayin'."

"You wanted to see what was up?"

"Yes, sah, bet yer life!"

"And you speedily made the discovery that the party was not after you?"

"Yes, sah, right off! But de furst t'ing dey did was to speak of Monkey Bill, and say how he had sent dem down to de Pines to de ole house, an' den dey spoke of a leetle game dat they was going to play, an' I reckoned to myself dat I was gwine to git a chance to git squar' wid Monkey Bill for de lickin' he done give me."

"And so you made up your mind to have a finger in the pie?"

"Yes, sah, yes, indeedy! dat was jes' w'ot I was a-gwine to do!"

"How many men were there?"

"Two, sah."

"Did they call each other by name?"

"Yes, sah."

"Do you remember what the names were?"

"You kin jes' bet yer life I does!" the boy exclaimed triumphantly.

"What were they?"

"Dere was a tall, long-legged rooster dat de odder feller called Rodney, an' de short man dat looked like a fighter, was called Red Murphy."

The Californian pondered over the matter for a few moments; both names were strange to him, and neither one of them did he expect to hear.

A solution of the mystery soon came to his mind though.

"These are only the tools," he murmured, communing with himself. "The principals have been careful to keep in the background. But although I do not know the two men, the chances are great that the parties in New York will know them, and so I will get a clew to the gang."

"Who else besides these two men have you seen?" the Californian asked aloud.

"Dey was a woman in de house."

"Old or young?"

"Well, boss, she's done got gray ha'r, an' her face looks a little ole, 'cos it is almost as dark as de face of a colored lady, but she is mighty spry on her feet for a woman wid sich gray ha'r."

"It is probably some woman who has assumed a disguise so that she cannot be recognized," the prisoner remarked.

"Yes, sah, dat is jes' about what I was t'inking, for she's too spry for sich an old-looking woman."

Now that the way of escape was open to him, the Californian fell to debating as to what had better be done.

Should he, after getting out of the trap, go before the nearest magistrate and get out a warrant and have the men in the house arrested?

"Do you know who is in the house now?" he asked of the boy, with this purpose in his mind.

"Only de two men, Rodney an' Red Murphy," was the reply. "Dere was two more, an' de woman, but dey went away."

The woman with the gray hair and the dark face was the one who had been in the carriage and decoyed the Californian into his present plight, and the two men who had departed were the principals, undoubtedly, who had planned the affair.

"Under the circumstances, then, it would be of little use to arrest the two men in the house," the spy mused. "Until I stand a chance to secure the principals, there is nothing to be gained by making any arrests. It will be better for me to wait, and in time I will get a

chance at the principals, if they do not take the alarm at my escape and give up their plans."

Then he said aloud to the boy:

"It was a fortunate chance that placed you here so that you could come to my assistance, otherwise I should undoubtedly have fared badly."

"I say, boss, is dat straight w'at dem fellers said—are you a detective?" asked the boy, in eager tone.

"Well, I reckon I will be a detective after this," the Californian replied, evasively, "for I most certainly will not rest content until I get square with the fellows for this trick they have played upon me."

"My uncle, Monkey Bill an' de ole Jew doctor is in wid dem men, you kin bet on dat, boss!" the boy declared. "I know dat dey is up to crooked work in de city, an' dat is de reason why I didn't want for to stay wid dem, but I would like for to get squar' for dem hidin's dat de pair on 'em give me."

"If your suspicion is correct that Monkey Bill and the Jew doctor are not on the square—if they are concerned in any crooked business in connection with the gang who got me into this trap, I can assure you that they will be brought up with a round turn, and that pretty soon too."

"Dat is w'at I want, boss!" the boy exclaimed, in huge delight. "Dat's de talk! Jest you fetch Monkey Bill and de ole Jew doctor inter jail an' I will do anything I kin for you!"

"I suppose there will be no difficulty in my getting out of this hole?"

"No, sah, no trouble at all; you kin come t'rough de passageway into de barn, an' den I kin take you t'rough de Pines to anywhar you want for to go."

"Is there any danger of the two fellows keeping a watch outside the house?"

"No, sah, for dey hab got it all laid out for to go on a big drunk to-night," the other replied. "One ob dem brought two bottles of whisky an' hid dem in de barn an' he allowed dat he an' de odder feller would go on de biggest kind ob a time to-night arter de capt'in got away."

"Ah, they spoke of one of the others as the captain, eh?"

"Yes, sah, dat is w'at dey called him. 'Arter de capt'in goes we kin git full,' dat's w'at Red Murphy sed to de odder man."

"And they probably have commenced operations by this time."

"Yes, sah, I reckon dey hab, for jes' as soon as de capt'in an' de woman went away in de carriage, de men got de whisky out ob de barn an' carried it into de house."

"They were in a hurry and they are probably pretty well under the weather now, so I ought to be able to get away without their knowing anything about it."

"Deed you had, sah; dere won't be no trouble 'bout dat!" the boy asserted.

"The chances are that my escape will not be discovered until the captain comes to call on me to-morrow noon," the Californian remarked, meditating upon the situation, the observation addressed more to himself than to the boy.

"Let me see!" he continued, musingly. "The best course for me to pursue will be to take a train for New York and consult with the authorities there in regard to this matter, for the quicker I put the detectives on the track the better."

"An' boss, don't forget Monkey Bill an' de ole Jew doctor!" the boy exclaimed. "They is powerful bad, both on 'em, I tell yer!"

"They shall receive attention—be sure of that!" the Californian replied. "I want to catch the first train in the morning. You can guide me to the station, I suppose?"

"Yes, indeedy!"

"I can get lodgings at some hotel near the depot."

"Yes, sah, plenty ob dem!"

"And when my captors come to look after me to-morrow, they will be astonished to find that the bird has flown, and, no doubt, will be puzzled to guess how I got out of the trap."

The negro indulged in a hearty chuckle as he reflected upon how astonished the ruffians would be.

Ten minutes later the Californian was free and on his way to the railway station.

CHAPTER XXII.

A DISCOVERY.

THE Californian found no difficulty in getting a room at a small hotel near the station, and there parted with the negro, first making arrangements so that he could keep in communication with him.

The first train to New York in the morning carried the police spy.

On arriving in the city he proceeded to the English ale-house and sent a communication to the chief of police.

The official came at once, for he anticipated that the report of the spy would be worth listening to, and he was not disappointed.

The Californian related all that had occurred, and the chief of police listened with the greatest interest.

"Upon my word! I think you are the luckiest party that I have ever met!" the official declared, after the recital was finished.

"Well, I think myself that I have no reason to complain as far as luck is concerned."

"This escape of yours was really marvelous!"

"It was rather stupid, though, to fall into the trap; I ought to have had better sense," the Californian observed, with a shake of the head.

"Well, I don't know about that. The scheme was certainly arranged in the most ingenious manner, and as you had no reason to suppose that your mission to Long Branch was suspected by any one, it was not strange you should be trapped, for, under the circumstances, it was not to be supposed you would be on your guard, as you would have been, if you had an idea that your men suspected you."

"Of course, I am only a greenhorn as yet, but I can promise you that I will not be caught so easily again!" the spy exclaimed in a tone of firm determination.

"Well, it is true that you have not had much experience in the detective line, but for all that you have succeeded in doing work which ranks you with the best and oldest men on the force."

The Californian bowed and expressed his pleasure at the compliment.

"Ah, but it is the truth and no flattery!" the chief of police declared. "Now this case is an extremely difficult one, and yet you have succeeded in getting a clew, and from the progress that you have already made, I should not be surprised if you succeeded in nabbing the whole gang."

"Well, I sincerely hope so," the spy declared.

"This discovery that you have made in regard to Red Murphy and the man called Rodney being connected with the gang, also that the Jew doctor—whose name, by the way, is Zimmer, Lenicas Zimmer—is in league with the rascals, is extremely important."

"You are acquainted, then, with Red Murphy and his pal, Rodney?"

"Yes; Murphy is as desperate a criminal as the city of New York has ever known, and has been mixed up in some big games, but the fellow is extremely shrewd, and has always managed to avoid conviction," the chief explained. "It has been my opinion for a long time that the fellow had a powerful gang at his back, for when he has been in trouble money has flowed as freely as water to get him out; he always has the best of counsel and a swarm of witnesses who are ready to swear to anything to get him off."

"That is where the advantage of being a member of a gang comes in," the detective observed.

"Oh, yes; if the fellow had been working single-handed, or with a pal or two, I would have had him in Sing Sing a long time ago, but as it has been, thanks to his able counsel and multitude of false witnesses, he has always managed to escape by the skin of his teeth."

"And do you know this Rodney?"

"Oh, yes; he is a Scotchman, Rodney McNabb," the official answered. "He used to be a lawyer, and a good one, too, but he is one of those men who cannot let liquor alone, and as he was a sharp, unscrupulous fellow, extremely fond of money, who would do almost anything to make a dollar, he got into scrape after scrape, until his professional brethren got after him. He was 'thrown over the bars,' as the saying is—that is, expelled from the ranks of the legal fraternity, and since that time has gone rapidly to the bad. I knew that he and Red Murphy were traveling around together, and it has been my idea that sooner or later he would come to grief."

"If things go on all right I think I will be able to put him behind the bars this time," the Californian remarked.

"It certainly looks as if you would."

"How about this Doctor Zimmer and his man, Monkey Bill?"

"A pair of bad eggs, both of them," the chief of police declared. "The Jew is an able man, understands his business, and could have a good practice if he would attend to it; but he is an inveterate gambler and a hard drinker; a man, I think, who prefers to make his money in a crooked way. I have been on his track for a good five years now; ever since he settled in his present quarters, in fact, but I have never been able to catch him, although I have come pretty near it two or three times."

"If I succeed in my little game the doctor will probably be caught in the net too."

"Well, I confess it would give me a deal of satisfaction to snare the old Jew," the chief of police admitted. "It is not pleasant for a man in my position to know that a fellow is crooked, and yet not be able to bring him up with a round turn."

"Now, in regard to the statement that the murdered crook made to me, have you taken any measures about the matter?"

"You refer to the tale that the man, Brakespear, and the woman, Alberta Darlington, the supposed heads of the Invisible Hand band, who took poison and died when under arrest, are both living, their supposed deaths being merely a clever trick to escape punishment?"

"Yes."

"Well, it is a pretty tough yarn, you know," the chief of police observed with a shake of the head.

"That is very true, but strange things happen in this world, sometimes," the spy urged.

"Under ordinary circumstances I do not think I would have taken any stock in the story, or, in fact, paid any attention to it, but as it seemed to make such an impression upon you, I ordered an investigation to be made in the matter."

"I am very much obliged," the Californian responded. "I would not have paid any attention to the story had it come to my knowledge under ordinary circumstances, but you must remember that the man was dying and knew that he had been killed by the order of the leader of the Invisible Hand band; he craved vengeance upon his slayer and so betrayed the secret to me. There was every reason why the man should tell the truth and none for speaking falsely."

"No, excepting that he himself had been deceived about the matter, and what he supposed to be the truth was not so."

"My man was too old a rascal to be fooled!" the detective asserted.

"I had a thorough examination made. You know that both the police surgeon and the coroner who held the inquest had no doubts on the subject; they asserted that both the man and woman were dead beyond a question."

"Yes, I am aware of their opinion on the subject, but at the time the examination was made neither one of the two had any suspicion that there was anything wrong, and the chances are a thousand to one, it seems to me, that both would be likely to take it for granted that the pair were dead and to content themselves with a common, careless examination."

"That is true," the chief of police admitted.

"No question in regard to the matter was raised, and under the circumstances the examination would not be a searching one."

"You know there are plenty of cases where there has been a doubt in regard to the death of the party, and doctors, after taking considerable trouble, have decided that death had come, when, in reality, it was not so, and the patient afterward recovered and lived many years."

"Yes, I am aware of that; doctors are men, not angels, and very often make mistakes."

"But, I had the investigation made on the lines you laid down."

"After the coroner got through with the bodies they were handed over to the friends of the parties, the law's demands being satisfied. The undertakers who took charge of the bodies, were interviewed. Everything seemed to be all square and above-board. The bodies were prepared for burial in the usual way."

"And where were they buried?"

"Not in this country; both were shipped to their friends in England."

"The bodies must have been embalmed then?" the Californian observed, thoughtfully.

"Yes, of course, or else the ocean voyage could not have been made."

"Did the undertakers perform the embalming?"

The chief pondered for a moment over the question.

"Upon my word!" he exclaimed, "I don't believe my man covered that point. When I gave the case to him I said, 'There have been some doubts raised in regard to the deaths of the two, and I wish you to look into the matter,' and I presume that when he came to the embalming business he thought that settled the thing and went no further."

"It looks to me like a plant," the Californian observed. "The bodies were shipped to England, so that if a question arose in regard to the deaths the remains could not be followed to a graveyard, and the question speedily settled by exhuming the bodies."

"By Jove! I believe you are right!" the chief of police exclaimed. "The thing seemed so improbable that I allowed myself to be satisfied with an insufficient examination. But it is not too late to remedy the error. I will use the telephone and look into the affair at once."

Going to the instrument, with which, as the reader will remember, the room was provided, the chief opened communication with Police Headquarters, and, as it happened, the particular detective who had been employed on this most peculiar case was on hand.

When the detective announced that he was ready for business the chief commanded:

"Put yourself in communication with the undertakers who took charge of the bodies of Brakespear and Mrs. Darlington. Ascertain if they embalmed the bodies themselves, or if they did not, who did."

"All right! I will ring them up at once," was the reply.

"Great invention this telephone," the chief of police remarked, as he sat down to wait for the information. "Without it, it would take hours to get the news which we will receive now in a few minutes."

"Although I am a green hand, and therefore not supposed to be a prophet, yet I will venture to predict that the undertakers did not do the embalming, for if they did it would clearly show

that the pair were dead, and I do not believe that to be the truth."

"Well, your guesses have come so near the truth heretofore that I am beginning to have a deal of faith in your predictions," the other remarked.

Within ten minutes the "hello!" of the detective at Police Headquarters came over the wire.

"All right! go ahead!" the chief answered.

"The undertakers did not do the embalming. It was done by the doctor who had always attended the two," the detective reported.

"The name of the doctor—the name?" cried the Californian, impulsively.

The chief put the question.

"Doctor Zimmer!" was the reply.

"The old Jew, by all that is wonderful!" the chief of police exclaimed, amazed by this unexpected development.

The spy laughed.

"You see your man halted on the threshold, as it were; another step and he would have gained a clew to the mystery!"

"Well, we have got it, so that is one consolation!" the official replied.

Then he signaled, "all right," over the instrument and resumed his seat.

"Now then, I think we have something to work on," the spy remarked.

"Yes, I think so, and having got a clew it will be our own fault if we do not succeed in getting at the heart of the mystery."

"The game which was played is plain to me now," the Californian remarked. "Did I not understand you to say that this old Jew is an able doctor?"

"Yes, he bears the reputation of being a learned and scientific man. He has only been in this country for seven or eight years, but I have heard from people who knew him in Europe that he is a graduate of one of the best medical colleges there and was regarded as one of the rising men of the day when he was young, but his gambling and drinking interfered with his getting on, and finally he had to run away to this country having got into some ugly scrapes."

"He would be just the kind of man then to suggest a scheme of this sort—not only to suggest it, but also to furnish the means by which it could be carried out."

"That is true," the official assented.

"His medical knowledge would enable him to compose a draught which, when taken, would produce the appearance of death."

"Throw the taker into a sort of trance," the chief of police remarked.

"Yes, a case of suspended animation and from which the patients could only be roused by the administering of an antidote."

"Mighty big risk to run," the other observed with a doubtful shake of the head.

"Desperate cases require desperate remedies, you know," the Californian argued. "The pair were in the toils and a long term of imprisonment almost surely awaited them. I judge that both of them were old hands and they had just about as lief die as to go to prison for ten or twenty years, so they took the risk and the scheme was successful."

"But now that we are on the right track we will make it lively for them!" the chief declared.

"Yes, and this time the trap will be so secure that not one shall escape!" the spy exclaimed.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A SURPRISE.

THE sun was high in the heavens, showing that the noon hour was near at hand, when a light buggy drove rapidly along the lonely road through the Pines which led to the house of the once notorious negro, Brazil Jackson.

In the carriage sat the Cuban, Pedro Sanches, and the Englishman, Fitzherbert.

As the reader has doubtless surmised it was the Cuban who had questioned the Californian in the cellar.

"By this time I fancy our man will be inclined to talk," the Cuban remarked. "He must be pretty thirsty and hungry, and when he finds that we have kept our word about putting the screws on him he will be apt to conclude that we mean business."

"Yes, he certainly ought to get that impression."

"And if he does not yield and make a clean breast of it then he is a tougher customer than I give him credit for being."

"But, I say, it seems to me that this affair is an ugly one any way you take it," Fitzherbert remarked after reflecting over the matter for a few moments.

"How so?"

"Why it is like the man who got hold of the bear's tail in the cave: he did not dare to let go and yet he was afraid to hold on," the Englishman explained. "You want this man to make a clean breast of it?"

"Yes, I am anxious to know just how much information the police possess. From the fact of this man being here in disguise it is evident that the detectives are on our track, although it is a complete puzzle to me how on earth they managed to get there."

"My dear fellow, it is my impression that you are altogether wrong!" Fitzherbert exclaimed. "That, as the Americans say, you are barking up the wrong tree. I do not believe this young fellow is a detective at all. But if he is, and does weaken under the pressure that you put upon him—suppose he reveals to you all he knows, what are you going to do with him?"

"Well, your simile of the man and the bear does fit pretty well, doesn't it?"

"So it seems to me."

"If he is a detective I will not dare to release him, for, of course, the moment he is free he will do his best to get square with us, although we might bind him with forty oaths not to take action against us."

"Oh, that is sure enough."

"And if he will not speak—or rather, persists in saying that he is not a detective and knows nothing about the business, we must keep him a close prisoner."

"It is just as I said—it is an extremely perplexing affair."

"Well, we will not cross the bridge—nor debate how we will cross it, until we come to the structure," the Cuban remarked. "Upon the way the man acts our future movements will depend."

Their arrival at the old house put a stop to the conversation at this point.

The pair alighted from the vehicle and entered the house, being received at the door by Rodney MacNabb and Red Murphy who had been playing cards to pass the time away.

A single look the Cuban took of the faces of the two, and then a dark and angry frown wrinkled his brows.

"Hello! you have both of you been drinking?" he exclaimed.

"Oh, no!" MacNabb replied, confused by the unexpected accusation.

But Red Murphy, who knew the captain too well to think he could deceive him, proceeded to explain.

"We only had a pint between us," he said. "You see, captain, it was awful dull work, and as I knew it would be I fetched along a flask so as to liven us up a bit."

"Only a pint, eh?" the other exclaimed, sharply.

"That is all; wish I may die if it wasn't!" the ruffian protested. "Ain't that so, Rodney?"

"Oh, yes," assented the other.

"I think it must have been a pretty big pint!" the Cuban declared, angrily. "From the looks of your faces I should think that you had got away with about a gallon. Both of you look as if you had been on an all night spree."

"Oh, 'tain't so, honor bright!" Red Murphy exclaimed, and his pal was equally emphatic.

"I suppose you thought that as the prisoner was safely locked in the cellar you could indulge in a spree, but I tell you, boys, it is risky work when there is business on hand."

"Oh, we have kept a good watch—you kin bet your life on that!" Red Murphy asserted.

"Oh, yes, there couldn't a mouse have stirred around here without we would have been onto him!" MacNabb declared.

The Cuban shook his head, for he felt extremely doubtful as to the truth of this assertion.

As far as he could judge from the looks of the men, both of them had been on a regular spree, and he was too well acquainted with what they could stand in that line to believe that a single pint flask would produce any impression upon two such hard and well-seasoned drinkers.

"The prisoner is all right, I suppose?" he said.

"Yes, I s'pose so; we ain't neither one of us been near him," Red Murphy replied. "You said that there wasn't any need of our troubling our heads about him, and so we didn't."

"That is all right."

Then the Cuban, Fitzherbert and Red Murphy assumed their disguises; after which they proceeded to the cellar, Sanches carrying the lighted lantern.

The cellar was reached by a trap-door which was situated in the floor of a small closet by the side of the massive, old-fashioned chimney which formed part of the side wall of the house.

Under the trap was a steep flight of steps which led to the door of the cellar. The door was guarded by a massive lock, the key of which hung on a nail driven in the wall by the side of the door.

"Get your weapons ready," the Cuban continued, as he inserted the key in the lock. "By this time he may have become desperate and he might try a rush for liberty."

"We are to let him have it then without mercy if he tries any funny business?" Red Murphy inquired.

"Oh, yes, for I fancy he is a pretty plucky fellow and might make a desperate fight if we don't show him right at the beginning that he doesn't stand any chance."

So the three stood all ready with their weapons drawn as the Cuban opened the door, but when they gazed into the cellar, Sanches holding up the lantern so that the light illuminated the darkness, a cry of amazement broke from their lips.

The cellar was empty—no sign of the prisoner was to be seen.

For a moment the three stood and stared, as

if they were not willing to believe the evidence of their eyes, then Sanches advanced into the cellar and flashed the light of the lantern into all the corners as though he expected to behold the prisoner crouching in some nook, but as the apartment was perfectly square, without even a place where a cat could take shelter from observation, it was absurd to suppose a man could find a place of concealment.

"What the deuce does this mean?" cried the Englishman, the first to speak.

"It means that we have had all our trouble for nothing!" the Cuban cried, in a voice full of anger. "The prisoner has succeeded in escaping."

"Yes, but how in blazes did he git out?" Red Murphy exclaimed, advancing into the cellar and beginning to examine the walls as though he suspected that the Californian had succeeded in digging a hole through one of them.

"Oh, you need not trouble yourself to look for a break in the walls for you will not find one!" the Cuban exclaimed.

"How did he get out then?" Red Murphy demanded in wonder. "The door was locked on the outside as you saw."

"There is only one explanation to the mystery. Either you or MacNabb have allowed the man to escape."

"Captain, 'tain't so! I swear it ain't so!" the ruffian declared. "I wish I may die if either Rodney or myself have been anywhere near the cellar since you left."

"Murphy, I don't doubt that you think you are telling the truth," the Cuban remarked. "But I can understand the way the thing happened just as well as though I had been here and witnessed it. Both you and Rodney have been on the biggest kind of a spree. Instead of a pint of liquor you probably had a couple of quarts. I can tell by your faces that you have been on an all-night drunk. Then, when you got so full that you were not conscious of what you were about, one of those whims which drunken men have sometimes, impelled one of you to take a look at the prisoner. He was smart enough to see how you were fixed and managed to slip out, and then the door was locked again in blissful unconsciousness that the bird had flown."

Red Murphy shook his head in a dogged sort of way.

"Well, I s'pose we did git a leetle full," he admitted, "but I will swear that neither MacNabb or myself went near the cellar."

"You were both so drunk that you did not know what you did, that is the secret of it, I think," the Cuban remarked.

Then he led the way from the cellar, locked the door and the party repaired to the main floor of the house.

MacNabb was astonished to see them come up so soon, and was still more astonished when he learned that the prisoner was not in the cellar, but when Sanches told him plainly what his ideas were about the matter, the man protested, even more vigorously than his companion had done, that the Cuban was wrong in his surmise.

He admitted that he and his pal had enjoyed a carouse, but scouted the idea that they had been so much overcome by the liquor as not to know what they were about.

"No, sir!" he exclaimed, "both Red and myself are too old soakers to get so full as to make any mistake of that kind."

"How do you account for the escape of the prisoner then?" Sanches asked.

"You are too much for me now," MacNabb replied with a shake of the head. "But one thing is certain, he did not escape through any fault of ours."

"Well, there is no use of crying over spilled milk," the Cuban remarked with the air of a philosopher.

"The mischief has been done, and the question for us now to consider is what we had better do."

"The man probably got off during the night," the Englishman observed, reflectively.

"Yes, and a lively time he must have had of it getting out of these Pines," the Cuban remarked.

"That is, unless he was lucky enough to head in the right direction. If he turned inland when he came to the main track he would go a good ten miles into the Pines before he came to a house, and in the darkness he would not be likely to see the clearings."

"As far as I can see the point is this," Fitzherbert remarked: "Would the man be likely to go to a magistrate as soon as he possibly could, and get out a warrant for us?"

"Yes, it seems to me that he would be apt to take an action of that kind, and as he knew we were coming to see him at noon, he would try to swoop down upon us as near noon as possible."

"Then the quicker we get out of this the better!" the Englishman exclaimed, beginning to strip off his disguise.

The others followed his example.

"One point is in our favor," the Cuban observed. "These country magistrates and officers are not quick to take action. They are not like the city men, who understand that when

they are dealing with first-class fellows in our line, it is necessary to act promptly."

"It will not do to depend upon that, though," Fitzherbert observed, "for this Californian is a wide-awake chap, and he may get the authorities to act promptly."

"We will be off!" the Cuban exclaimed. "But as it is absolutely necessary that we should be posted in regard to whether there is any attempt made to capture us or not, Murphy, you and MacNabb must conceal yourselves in the Pines, near enough to keep watch on the house."

"All right," Murphy responded.

"It is my impression that there is not much danger of any such thing happening, for as the Californian is a stranger to this region, and must have made his way through the Pines in the darkness, it seems to me that the chances are fully ten to one that he would never be able to find his way back to this spot, nor would the local officers be able to find it from any description he would be able to give, for there are fifty old cabins in this desolate tract of woods which would answer to the description of this one."

"We will keep our eyes open, anyway," Red Murphy asserted.

Then the Cuban and Fitzherbert got into the buggy and drove off, and as soon as they were out of sight, Red Murphy and MacNabb took to the woods, ambushing themselves so that they could command a view of the little clearing in which the old cabin stood.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE CALIFORNIAN'S STORY.

THE pair rode on for awhile in silence, and then the Englishman, who had been meditating over the matter, and who was evidently uneasy in his mind, remarked:

"Suppose that you have made a mistake about this Californian—suppose that he is not a detective, what course do you think he would pursue under the circumstances?"

"Oh, I do not know—it is hard to say," the Cuban replied.

"It is my opinion that he would not apply immediately to the authorities; I think he would be likely to seek advice before making any move."

Sanches reflected over the matter for a few moments.

"Yes, I think you are right," he replied, after a pause. "He would not be apt to be in a hurry until he had taken counsel; but I feel so certain that the fellow is a detective that I have not troubled myself to calculate what he would do if he were not."

"Of course it may be that he is," the Englishman admitted. "One thing is pretty certain: this little episode will be apt to make the man show his true colors. If he is a detective he will be sure to get the officers after us as soon as possible."

"Well, I am not so certain about that," the Cuban exclaimed, decidedly.

"Why not? If he gets the officers and makes a prompt descent upon the old house in the Pines does he not stand a chance of capturing some of the men who nailed him—will he argue in this way?"

"I think not—if he is a first-class man, and I am doing the fellow the honor to believe that he is," Sanches replied.

"He knows that we will take the alarm the moment his escape is discovered, and he is too shrewd to suppose that we will remain in the neighborhood of the old house to be captured when he chooses to come after us."

"Upon my word! I believe you are right!" the Englishman exclaimed, after meditating over the matter for a few moments. "But if he is a detective what game do you think he will try to play now?"

"Ah, now you are too much for me!" the other replied. "I am no prophet, nor the son of a prophet, and it is far easier to make a guess at what a man will not do under certain circumstances than to predict what action he will take."

"Wait until I see how the fellow carries sail, and then I may be able to give a guess in regard to his future movements."

By this time the pair had reached Cedar avenue, and as they turned into it they were amazed to behold the subject of their conversation—the Californian—trudging on ahead, walking with the air of a man who was footsore and weary.

"By Jove!" cried Fitzherbert, "there is our man now!"

"Sure enough!"

"And just making his way back to Long Branch!"

"So it appears."

"And he looks as if he had been some time on the road too, for he is covered with dust."

"Yes, and walks as if he was tired."

"Where do you suppose he has been?"

"Oh, he probably lost his way in the Pines, and despairing of getting out in the darkness, camped down at the foot of some tree for the night."

"What do you think now in regard to his being a detective in disguise?"

The Cuban shook his head, and a perplexed look appeared upon his face.

"I don't really know—I must admit that I am puzzled now."

"If he was a detective he wouldn't be here, for he would be apt to seek the nearest magistrate."

"Yes, unless this man is an extra deep one, and is scheming to catch us in a trap from which it will not be possible for us to escape," the Cuban remarked, his face grave and dark with the lines of care.

"Well, I thought I was cautious and inclined to see an officer in each bush," the Englishman observed, with a laugh. "But you are, by far, more suspicious than I ever dreamed of being."

"Yes, it is my nature, and two years of a life of peril and adventure have taught me to be always on my guard."

"Suppose we pick him up, then we will hear what he has to say about the affair, and may be able to come to some decision as to whether he is likely to prove dangerous or not," Fitzherbert remarked.

"The idea is a good one," the Cuban observed.

"It is not possible that he can suspect that we had aught to do with the affair, even if he be the smartest detective that ever followed on a trail, so he will not hesitate to tell us his story, and the deuce will be in it if we do not succeed in gaining some information."

"Oh, we will be sure to get some points," the Englishman asserted in the most confident manner.

The Cuban, who was driving, had pulled his horse into a walk upon perceiving the Californian, and now he started him into a trot again.

The sound of the carriage-wheels attracted the attention of the Californian, and he halted and turned to see who was coming.

The carriage was close at his heels as he did so, and the two in the vehicle uttered well-simulated cries of surprise as they pretended to recognize the young man.

"Hello! you look as if you had been taking a long walk!" the Cuban exclaimed.

"Are you in training for a 'Go as you please'?" Fitzherbert inquired, facetiously.

"Well, I have walked a deuced sight further than is pleasant," the Californian replied with a grimace.

"Jump in and try a little riding by way of a change," said the Cuban. "The seat is a broad one, and we can manage to make room for you."

"Much obliged, and I can tell you, gentlemen, I am mighty glad of the chance, for I am about beat out," the Californian remarked as he climbed into the buggy.

"How does it happen that you are so?" the Englishman inquired. "I thought you were joking, but you really do look as if you had had a hard time of it."

"I have and no mistake!" the Californian exclaimed, decidedly. "Are either of you posted in regard to the country back of these main roads?"

"Yes, I am in a measure—that is, I know that it is a pine wilderness. I attempted to drive through it once, seeking a short cut to Freehold, the county seat, but lost my way, and had such a deuce of a time in getting out that I never tried it again," the Cuban remarked.

"Well, gentlemen, I suppose it will appear almost incredible to you, but I have been wandering around in this pine forest all night," the Californian declared.

His companions expressed their utter amazement, and then the Cuban pressed him to explain.

"It is a rough joke on me, gentlemen, and I want you to give me your words that if I tell you, you will not let the affair get out."

The pair, of course, readily gave the required promise.

"I have always flattered myself that there was not much of the greenhorn about me," the other remarked, "but it is my notion now that the biggest tenderfoot that ever struck the West could not have been more easily taken in and done for."

"Is that possible?" cried the Cuban, with well-assumed astonishment.

"I would not have believed it!" Fitzherbert protested.

"Listen, gentlemen, and judge for yourselves."

Then the Californian related how he had received the letter asking for an interview, and, just for a lark, kept the appointment.

"I knew that it was a foolish thing to do," he added, "for I was aware that there might be a trap of some kind connected with the affair, and I took the precaution to conceal a pair of revolvers in my clothes so as to be ready for emergencies. But in spite of the fact that I was on my guard, I got a crack on the head which laid me out, and I didn't get any chance to pull my guns either."

Then he related how, when he recovered consciousness, he found himself in the cellar and the interview that he had there with the masked man who accused him of being a detective.

"Of course the thing took me completely by surprise, it was so supremely ridiculous," he explained. "But the fellow would not believe a word I said, and left me with the threat that I should not have anything to eat or drink until I

made a clean breast of it, as he termed it, that is owned up that I was a detective and told him what my little game was down here at Long Branch."

"Upon my word your adventure is as exciting as any chapter of a novel that I have read for a dog's age!" the Cuban declared.

"Oh, yes, it beats the average novel all to pieces!" the Englishman asserted. "But then truth is always stranger than fiction, you know."

"But, I say, how on earth did you succeed in getting out of your extremely unpleasant predicament?" Sanches asked.

"Well, the way I escaped is as strange as any other part of the story!" the Californian declared. "After I was left alone in the darkness I made a careful examination of my surroundings, and the result was that I could not find a hole big enough to allow a rat to escape, and the door was so solid that it would have required an ax to force a way through it."

"Of all the delightful situations!" the Englishman exclaimed.

"Yes, pleasant, wasn't it?" the Californian said with a grimace. Well, I had found a box in my researches, and putting it in a corner, so I could rest my back against the wall. I settled down to pass the night as comfortably as possible."

"Well, you certainly took it coolly!" the Cuban exclaimed in accents of admiration.

"How else could he take it, dear boy? It was Hobson's choice, you know!" Fitzherbert declared.

"Notwithstanding the novelty of my position and the peril which surrounded me I went sound asleep."

"It is possible?" Sanches cried. "I think that I am about as merry a fellow as can be found, and yet, under such circumstances, I do not believe I should have been able to close my eyes."

"And I know deuced well that I wouldn't!" the Englishman declared.

"Well, I reckon that I was born tired, anyway," the Californian rejoined with a laugh. "I don't know how long I slept, but I should judge that it was for some hours when I was suddenly awakened by a noise which seemed like the slamming of a door."

"I jumped at once to the conclusion that my jailer had come again, but the apartment was dark, and when I listened I could not detect that there was anybody in the room. But the banging of the door seemed to be so real that I got up and went to it so as to see if it was open, and it was!"

"Well, of all the lucky chances!" the Cuban declared.

"Perfectly wonderful, dear boy, perfectly wonderful!" the Englishman asserted.

But in the eyes of both the speakers there was a peculiar look which had nothing to do with their words.

"I opened the door; there was a flight of steps without, which led upward, and upon one of the steps was a lighted lantern."

"Upon examining the door I found that the key was in the lock, and then the sound of voices in the room above came to me."

"I crept up the steps and listened. In the room above a couple of ruffians were carousing; both of them were steeped in liquor, so that they hardly knew what they were doing, and I gathered from their conversation that they had paid a visit to the cellar to see how I was getting on; then I saw how it was that the door came to be left open. The fellows were so drunk as not to be capable of knowing what they were about, and when they had taken a look into the cellar they had neglected to lock the door."

"Well, that was a fortunate thing for you!" Sanches exclaimed.

"Yes, really about as great a piece of luck as I ever heard of," the Englishman remarked.

"I could see from the way the fellows were going on that they would soon be overcome by the liquor, and I calculated that if I kept quiet for a while I would be able to escape without their knowledge, and in order to keep them from knowing that I was not in the cellar, I locked the door and hung the key up on a nail in the wall, which I conjectured had been placed there for that purpose."

"Now, by Jove! that was an extremely cunning thing for you to do!" Fitzherbert exclaimed, approvingly. "That is a trick which I am sure I never should have thought of, and it was a capital idea, too!"

"Yes, an excellent one!" Sanches asserted. "I suppose your idea was that if the ruffians took it into their heads to take a look at the cellar in the morning the fact that the door was locked and the key hung up would lead them to suppose that everything was all right, and so keep them from making an examination."

"Yes, that was my idea, and after fixing the door I took a seat at the head of the steps and waited."

"For the ruffians to fall asleep, eh?" the Cuban remarked.

"Exactly! Well, I suppose it was a good hour before I dared to make a move; you see, I was so near liberty that I did not want to risk a recapture by being in a hurry."

"Of course not!" the Cuban exclaimed.

"Then I opened the trap-door and came up. Both of the ruffians were sound asleep on the floor, evidently completely overcome by the liquor, so I had no difficulty in getting out of the house; but it was after I got out that my troubles began. The night was quite dark, and I found myself in the midst of a pine forest. There was a road which led to and ended at the old house, where I had been held captive. I took this road and kept it until I came to another one, from which the first branched off. Of course when I came to the second road I hadn't the least idea which way I should turn. It was my idea that I ought to go to the west, and I tried to tell from the stars which way the west was, but being extremely rusty in my astronomy, I could not gain any information. So, finally, at a venture, I turned to the right. This I afterward discovered was a mistake: I ought to have gone to the left."

"It is a strange thing, you know, but I have always observed that in a case of this kind the odds are about two to one that a man usually takes the wrong turning," the Englishman observed.

"Yes, I reckon it is so. I went on for a while and then I came to another road, and as this seemed to be more traveled than the one I was on, I turned into it; my idea was that I would come to a house where I might inquire the way, but, gentlemen, as I am a living man, I swear to you, I believe I walked for over three hours in that dense pine forest before I came to a house, and then it was only a deserted cabin, with the roof off."

"I don't doubt it at all," the Cuban exclaimed, "for I remember the day I attempted to drive through the Pines, and got lost in them, the houses were few and far between, and I got the impression that it was the most lonesome bit of country that I had ever seen."

"I reckon you are about right," the Californian remarked. "When I came to the old house, I was completely tired out, and as there was a little shed at the back of the house where I could get shelter, I made up my mind to stay there until morning. I lay down in a corner upon a pile of litter, and I don't think I ever slept as soundly in my life."

"No doubt—no doubt," Fitzherbert cried. "You were completely fagged out."

"Yes, and I did not wake until the sun was high in the heavens. Then I started on my journey again, and as I had no notion of where I was going, whenever I came to a road which seemed to be better traveled than the one on which I was on I took it."

"Finally I came to a house occupied by an old negro, and upon telling him that I had lost my way, I was astonished to discover that I was ten miles from Long Branch, and was traveling directly away from it."

"Well, that was a discovery," Sanches exclaimed.

"Oh, yes. Well, the old negro was a trump; gave me a cup of coffee and some corn-bread, and then started me in the right direction, and here I am."

"About the strangest adventure that I think I ever heard of," the Cuban remarked. "But now you will have a chance for revenge. By making a complaint to a magistrate you can get a warrant, and, if you are prompt, you may be able to catch some of the rascals."

"Oh, no, what is the use of bothering about the matter. I have escaped with a whole skin, and am quite content to cry quits," the Californian replied. "Besides, I never should be able to find the house again where I was taken. To look for it in the Pines would be like the traditional searching for a needle in a bundle of hay. I am well out of the scrape, and you would be safe in betting a large amount that I never will be caught in any such trap again."

"And how strange, my dear boy, that these fellows should take you to be a detective," the Englishman exclaimed.

"Oh, I do not take any stock in that business at all," the Californian answered. "That was only a blind. When the fellows found that I wouldn't own up that I was a detective, then they would have proposed to let me go on condition of my forking over a certain amount of money. That is an old game up in the Rocky Mountain region, but I never expected to see it worked right here in the heart of civilization."

"Then you are not going to do anything about it?" the Cuban asked.

"No, what is the use? I should only make myself a laughing stock if I made the affair public, and I am not anxious to let everybody know just what a fool I was."

"Our friend is right, dear boy; he would not be apt to make anything, for these rascals have covered up their tracks very carefully."

By this time they were at the hotel, and the conversation ended.

The Californian went up-stairs to his room, and the others took a turn on the piazza.

"Well, what do you think?" Fitzherbert asked.

"He is no detective, and you can skin him as soon as you like!"

CHAPTER XXV.

MORE PLOTTING.

TEN days have come and gone since the one

on which occurred the events detailed in our last chapters.

On the veranda of the hotel sat the three conspirators, enjoying their cigars.

It was after dinner, the dusk of the evening had come, and the three were in a secluded corner, remote from the other guests, so that they were able to converse freely.

The Frenchman and Fitzherbert had been seated for some ten minutes in the corner, and the Cuban had just joined them at the time we introduce the three to the notice of the reader.

"What is the matter—you seem to be out of sorts?" De Neville inquired, as Sanches helped himself to a chair.

There was a dark lock on the swarthy face of the Cuban which prompted the inquiry.

"Well, things are not going as they ought to go," Sanches replied.

"How so?" Fitzherbert asked.

"Miss Green has just gone out for a drive with this infernal Californian," the Cuban answered.

"They are going to Ocean Grove, and, of course, will not be back until nine or ten to-night."

"This really looks as if the fellow was making an impression upon the girl," and the Frenchman shook his head, gravely. "It is a bad sign."

"I do not understand it, for during the past ten days you have, apparently, been gaining rapidly in her favor."

"It is the infernal coquetry of women!" the Cuban exclaimed. "There is no doubt that the Californian has entered for the prize. I don't know whether the fellow has any money or not, but I am inclined to the belief that he is nothing but an adventurer, and he seeks the girl because she is an heiress. In a quiet way I endeavored to insinuate as much to Thompson, but I found that he had an extremely good opinion of the fellow, and so I did not dare to say much, for I fear he would suspect I was trying to prejudice him against the man."

"You would think, considering that she believes she is indebted to you for her life, that no other man would stand any chance against you," the Frenchman observed, thoughtfully.

"That has made me a prime favorite, of course," the Cuban replied. "And I do not think there is much doubt that she esteems me much more than she does him, but these other women with whom she associates here have put the deuce into her with their tales of how lovers should be treated. About the whole talk of these idle dames by the sea is how nice it is to have a jolly flirtation with this fellow or that, and the girl thinks she must be in the fashion."

"Do you think this Mackay has any serious designs?" Fitzherbert asked.

"Upon the girl?"

"Yes."

"Well, it looks like it," the Cuban replied. "And if he is a fortune-hunter, as I think, he will do all in his power to win her."

"He is interfering in your game then and some way must be devised to put a stop to it," the Frenchman remarked.

"Yes, if he was out of the way I do not doubt but that I would be able to win the girl's consent to a union," Sanches remarked. "You would hardly think that this girl, fresh from the counter of a dry-goods store, would be able so quickly to assume the airs of a grand lady, and indulge in all sorts of caprices just as if she had been born with a golden spoon in her mouth."

"Women are apt imitators, more so than men," Fitzherbert remarked.

"Well, one thing is certain, I do not intend to allow the girl to make a fool of me!" Sanches exclaimed.

"Certainly not!" the Frenchman assented. "You are not the kind of man to stand anything of the sort."

"The first thing to be done is to get this Californian out of the way so I will have a clear field," the Cuban remarked. "What progress have you made toward developing a plot by means of which you can possess yourselves of the fellow's wealth? If you could succeed in cleaning him out he would, probably, be obliged to go away, and then I might be able to entangle the heiress into an engagement."

"Well, dear boy, we have not been able as yet to get a chance at him," the Englishman replied. "He professes to be quite a gamester and De Neville and myself have been maneuvering to get him to join us in a quiet game when we will have things so arranged that we will be able to get all the money he possesses, no matter how good a player he is."

"Yes, that is the way the affair must be arranged. You must have matters so fixed that after he enters the trap he cannot get out until he has been thoroughly stripped," the Cuban observed.

"We have the things fixed now," the Frenchman said. "The Red Princess has taken a little cottage at Pleasure Bay and has agreed to join us in our scheme."

"She will be a valuable assistant," Sanches commented. "But I wonder that you were able to get her to go into the plot, for she got the impression that the Californian was a dangerous fellow the first time she saw him."

"Yes, I know that is true, but we have talked her out of that notion," Fitzherbert explained. "And then we have agreed, too, to give her a good share of the plunder, and that was a great inducement, for the Red Princess, you know, is always in want of money."

"Yes, that is because she is the most extravagant jade that ever lived!" the Cuban declared. "When she has money she literally flings it away. She has made enough out of her New York place to be able to retire with a small fortune, although she has only been running it a little while, but money seems to burn a hole in her pocket, to use the old saying."

"Yes, with her it is 'easy got, easy gone,'" the Frenchman remarked.

"How soon do you calculate to put the scheme against the Californian in execution?" the Cuban asked.

"In a few nights," Fitzherbert replied. "I made a casual remark to-day that the Red Princess had taken a cottage at Pleasure Bay, and that we must drive over and visit her some evening. I uttered this in the Californian's presence, you know, intending to lead him on, and he jumped at the bait immediately—inquired if she was going to run a game there; I told him that I thought not—that it was my impression she had come down for rest, but I had no doubt that we could get up a little game among ourselves, for quite a number of her friends were in her immediate neighborhood, and it was almost certain that we would find a party there, so we could have all the amusement we wanted."

"You seemed to have planned this scheme very carefully," Sanches observed. "And now, supposing that the Californian discovers that he is in a trap, either before or after he loses his money, what are you going to do? Of course it may be that no such incident will happen," the Cuban hastened to add, "but it is always prudent to be prepared for all contingencies."

"We have thought of that," the Englishman replied. "In case the fellow becomes ugly De Neville will take him in hand."

"Yes, if he wishes to quarrel he will find me ready for him," the Frenchman remarked, complacently.

"I am a gentleman, and a soldier, and in case of a hostile meeting with this young fellow I have no doubt I will be able to teach him a lesson which he will not be apt to forget for some time."

"Be careful in regard to meeting him with revolvers in case a quarrel should arise between you," the Cuban cautioned. "These Californians are generally expert revolver-shots, and it will not be policy for you to attempt to beat the man at his own game."

"Ah, trust me to look out for that," the marquis replied with a wise look. "I am a gentleman, and when it comes to an affair of honor the sword is the gentleman's weapon; I shall arrange the matter, too, so that the choice of weapons will rest with me."

"And supposing that we succeed in getting the Californian out of the way and then the heiress fights shy of your suit?" Fitzherbert asked.

"In that case we will have to adopt violent measures," the Cuban replied, a stern look on his swarthy face. "The girl and her fortune must be mine, and if I cannot win her by fair means then I will by foul."

"Of course!" the Frenchman cried, in a tone of approval. "A girl's silly whims must not be allowed to stand between you and a prize of a million of dollars!"

"It is not the girl I care for, but the money, and if I could get the cash without the girl I would prefer it, but as I cannot I take the incumbrance with the money, and trust to be able to get rid of it by some lucky stroke in the future," Sanches remarked.

"But if the girl will not agree to marry you how do you propose to arrange the matter?" the Englishman asked.

"Then the old house in the Pines comes again in play," the Cuban answered. "Luckily the Californian was not disposed to kick up any row about his little adventure in the woods and so the secret of the old house was preserved."

"Now if I find that the girl is disposed to play the coquette with me, and she refuses to give me a favorable answer, I shall watch my opportunity to get her to drive out with me some day, take her to a house like the cottage of the Red Princess, where she can be induced to drink a harmless glass of lemonade. The drink will be drugged, of course, then, under cover of the darkness, I will carry her to the old house in the Pines, and there you two can be in waiting with a minister, a black sheep you understand, but a genuine parson for all that, and fully competent to perform the marriage ceremony."

"Slippery Jack Heatherwood would be the very man!" Fitzherbert exclaimed. "He is a parson all right, although he did run away from England with all the money he could lay his hands on."

"He is the man I have in view," Sanches remarked. "He has been crooked for years, but had skill enough to keep from being discovered until he took to drink and then the

truth came out. I have him safe under cover in New York, all in readiness for action."

"Heatherwood will perform the marriage service, and when the girl recovers from her stupor and finds that she is my wife, and that the fact that she has run away with me to get married has been publically proclaimed to all the world, for I shall take pains to have a full account sent to all the newspapers, what can she do?"

"Oh, the scheme will work beyond a doubt?" the Frenchman exclaimed. "If she declares that she was drugged no one will believe her, and, in fact, how is she going to tell what was the matter with her? She will know that she was out of sorts, but the chances are a hundred to one that she will not suspect that she was drugged."

"Oh, I do not think there will be any trouble after the affair is over," the Cuban remarked. "I shall play the role of the desperate lover—tell her that I noticed she seemed to act strangely and my passion for her was so great that I hastened to improve the opportunity to get her to become my wife."

"Oh, the scheme will work undoubtedly!" the Frenchman exclaimed. "If I am any judge of human nature the girl is not particularly strong-minded—not the stuff of which heroines are made, and when she finds that she is married to you, and all the particulars have been given to the world, she would not dare to make any trouble about the matter."

"That is my opinion too," Fitzherbert remarked. "If the affair is managed skillfully she will be sure to fall into the trap."

"Yes, and once she is in it no power on earth can rescue her!" the Cuban declared.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A LITTLE GAME.

THE three sat on the piazza and chatted and smoked until the clock struck ten, and at that hour the Californian and Miss Green returned.

The Cuban scowled as he watched Mackay escort the heiress into the hotel and heard her thank him for the extremely pleasant evening which she had enjoyed.

"If it were not for the fact that you two had a trap arranged to catch this intruding rascal I would speedily find a way to pick a quarrel with him, and then, unless he is a far better man than I think he is, I would soon drive him away!" Sanches declared.

"Leave him to us," the marquis observed. "We will attend to his case."

"And the sooner you set about it the better!" the Cuban declared.

"Why not this very night?" questioned Fitzherbert.

"To-night?" asked Sanches, glancing at the marquis.

"Well, there isn't any reason why we should not try the scheme to-night," the Frenchman observed.

"But is the Red Princess prepared?" the Cuban asked.

"Oh, yes," the Englishman answered. "Two of her principal men are with her and that will be enough with us three, the marquis, the Californian and myself, to make up a party. In fact the fewer witnesses to the affair the better, particularly if any trouble occurs, and it is more than likely that there will be trouble."

"Yes, unless the fellow turns out to be a lamb instead of a lion and submits to be fleeced without making any disturbance," the marquis observed.

"Very well, go ahead as soon as you like," the Cuban said. "Of course the quicker the fellow is got out of the way the better."

"We will attend to his case at once!" Fitzherbert declared.

And then the Englishman and the marquis left the Cuban and went in search of the Californian.

They found him chatting with the clerk in the office, and when he saw the two come into the apartment he came up and greeted them.

"Well, gentlemen, any fun on the carpet for to-night?" the Californian inquired, in his frank, off-hand way.

The pair exchanged glances.

Was this man a prophet, that he seemed to know by instinct that they were seeking him for some especial purpose?

"Oh, no, nothing particular," Fitzherbert answered, carelessly. "But I suppose we could scare up a little fun if you felt disposed for amusement."

"Oh, yes; undoubtedly we could find some if we choose to go in search of it," the marquis remarked.

"Let us go, then, by all means, for I feel just in the mood for a little amusement to-night," the Californian declared.

"We might pay a visit to the Red Princess and see if we couldn't get up a little game," the Englishman suggested.

"The very thing," cried Mackay. "Let us go at once. Shall we call a carriage?"

"No; I will go to the stables and get a two-seated carriage," the Englishman replied. "Then we can drive over ourselves, and without anybody knowing anything about it. If we take a hack it will be all over the town to-morrow."

"That is very true; these country hackmen have no discretion," the marquis observed.

"I will be back in ten minutes; walk slowly up the avenue and I will overtake you; then no one at the hotel will see us depart, and there can be no gossip."

The others thought this was a good idea, and said as much.

So while Fitzherbert hurried off to the stables, the marquis and the Californian proceeded up the avenue.

Within ten minutes they were overtaken by the Englishman, who was in a light two-seated carriage.

The pair got in and away they went.

It was not far from Long Branch to that part of Pleasure Bay where the Red Princess had taken a cottage.

The house was in rather a lonely spot, it being fully a thousand yards from any other, and the grounds ran to the water's edge.

The Red Princess was sitting on the veranda, chatting with a couple of bearded, foreign-looking gentlemen, as the carriage drove up.

She expressed her delight at seeing the three gentlemen, and introduced her associates as her cousin, Nicholas Golitzin, and his particular friend, Alexander Strogoff.

The Englishman explained that they were on a time-killing expedition, and had driven over from Long Branch in hopes to be able to enjoy a social game.

"My house is at your disposal, gentlemen," the Red Princess declared, with her sweetest smile. "Enter and enjoy yourselves just as if it were your own."

Then she led the way into the cottage.

"The dining-room being at the rear of the house, will probably answer your purpose better than any other room," she said as she conducted them to it.

It was nicely furnished, and there was an expensive sideboard, which the Red Princess unlocked and opened, exposing to view a fine assortment of wines and liquors.

"This is liberty hall, gentlemen!" she exclaimed. "Do not fail to make yourselves at home, but you must excuse me, as I have some letters to write. I will see that you have a little lunch in an hour or so. Adieu!" and with a graceful courtesy the lady departed.

The bearded gentlemen accompanied the three into the room, and the Californian who, by the light afforded by the massive hanging-lamp, had a good opportunity to examine their faces, soon came to the conclusion that the only Russian there was about them was their names, although their short, dark beards at the first glance gave them a foreign appearance.

"What shall we play, gentlemen?" Fitzherbert asked, as they took seats around the table, first patronizing the wines of the sideboard, though, and procuring a pack of cards from a pile of a half a dozen or so that were in one of the nooks of the sideboard.

"Do you understand our great American game of poker?" the Californian asked.

"Oh, yes, that is my favorite game!" the Englishman declared.

"And mine, too!" asserted the marquis.

"And you, gentlemen, what do you say?" Mackay asked of the supposed Russians.

Both begged to be excused from playing. Luck had not been running their way lately, and they had rather not play.

"Well, the three of us ought to be able to have a nice little game," the Californian remarked.

"Oh, yes," assented Fitzherbert, and the marquis also agreed.

"What will we make the ante—a dollar?" Mackay asked.

The others exchanged glances; it was plain the Californian was in for business.

"Yes, a dollar will suit me," the Englishman remarked.

"And me also," the marquis said.

"We will play the gentleman's game—no freeze-out! A man must have a sight for his money," the Californian announced.

"Certainly, of course; we are not gamblers," the Englishman declared. "We are merely playing for amusement, and put a little money up to make the game interesting."

"Exactly; we play just to pass the time away," the marquis observed.

Then they cut for deal and the Californian won.

He was sitting at the end of the table, the Englishman on his right and the marquis on his left.

Back of the Californian was the wall in which were two windows, now closely curtained, looking into the garden.

If Mackay had suspected that the room was one where the walls had eyes to look into a player's hand, and cunning machinery by means of which a knowledge of the hand could be telegraphed to the other players, he could not have selected a position more calculated to set at defiance any such swindling device.

From the position in which he sat it was not possible for any one either in the room or out of it to look into his hand, and if there were peep-holes in the walls his precautions set them at naught.

After the game commenced, though, the two Russians, who had been sitting at the upper end of the table, got up, sauntered to the sideboard, helped themselves to a glass of wine and then slowly edged down so as to take up a position in the rear of the Californian.

But Mackay had his eyes on them and immediately objected.

"Now, gentlemen, if you stand there I will not be able to play a bit. It always makes me nervous when anybody is near me, and when a man loses his nerve at poker he might as well lay right down and give up the game."

The Californian made the speech in such an easy, good-natured way, that it was hardly possible to take offense at it, and although the Russians looked annoyed, yet they nodded, said they would not do anything to disturb him for the world, and then resumed their former position.

The Englishman and the marquis also looked troubled for a moment, and they took advantage of the Californian being occupied with an examination of his hand to exchange meaning glances.

It was plain that they were disappointed. The Californian was no man's fool, and it was not going to be so easy a matter to fleece him as they had calculated upon when they had started in on the affair.

The game proceeded, and before they had been at it long the adventurers made the discovery that the Californian was as good a poker player as they had ever encountered.

He thoroughly understood the science of the game, was a bold and reckless bettor, and as he had plenty of money, and was not afraid to risk it, the advantages were most decidedly on his side.

Then, too, fortune seemed to favor him, and he was a steady winner.

In truth, neither of his adversaries were a match for him, for although they had protested that poker was their favorite game, yet it was plain that they were far from being good players.

Both the marquis and Fitzherbert were old card-sharppers, though, men who, as the French say, "aid Fortune by holding good hands," and when they came to the conclusion that it would not be possible for them to win the Californian's money by fair means they immediately resorted to foul.

And the Frenchman, who prided himself upon the deftness of his fingers and the skill with which he could cheat, when it came his turn to deal, proceeded to manipulate the cards and in the most skillful manner possible got three aces up his sleeve.

Then the hands were dealt, but the Californian did not offer to take up the cards which had been given him, but, looking at the marquis, his peculiar eyes suddenly appearing to be more green than gray, he said:

"I suppose you believe in the old juggler's assertion that a man's hands are quicker than his eyes?"

"Eh?" exclaimed the Frenchman in decided uneasiness, not knowing what to make of this strange observation, while Fitzherbert changed color from nervousness.

The Englishman guessed what his companion had done, although he had not watched him closely, refraining from doing so lest the Californian should perceive what he was up to, and take it into his head to do likewise.

"The saying may be true when the man who tries the trick is extra good at his business," the Californian remarked, "or if the people who are watching him are greenhorns who are not up to snuff, but when a man like you does the funny business, and a chap like myself looks on, why it is utter folly to think that the cards can be manipulated so the business cannot be detected."

The marquis got red in the face, for this language was entirely too plain to be misunderstood, while the brow of the Englishman grew dark with rage.

To his thinking it was monstrous that his partner should be detected the very moment he tried to do a little "fine work."

"What do you mean? I do not understand you, sir?" the Frenchman exclaimed, indignantly, pretending to fly into a great rage.

"Oh, yes, you understand me well enough!" the Californian retorted. "What is the use of beating about the bush? And I say what an idiot you were to try any game of the kind with a man like myself. It isn't possible that you made the mistake of thinking that I was a pigeon who could be plucked without any trouble? If you did, all I have to say is that your judgment is exceedingly poor."

"I am amazed at your language and am at a complete loss to know what you mean!" the Frenchman cried, grandiloquently.

"Oh, nonsense! why not own up now that you are fairly caught?" the Californian exclaimed. "I am an old stager and you cannot play any game of this kind on me. You have managed in the shuffle to get some cards up your sleeve—good ones of course!"

And then, rising suddenly, the speaker reached over the table, grabbed the marquis by the wrist and, as the Frenchman sprung to his feet with a

violent oath, the three cards which he had secreted dropped out on the table.

"Aces, by the Lord Harry!" cried Mackay. "Well, there isn't anything mean about you, I must say! Still, I suppose that when a man goes in to steal cards out of the pack the bigger the cards he takes the better!"

All within the room were now on their feet and the excitement was intense.

The adventurers had anticipated a quarrel but it had come sooner they expected.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE MARQUIS SEEKS SATISFACTION.

"You infamous scoundrel, I will have your life for this insult!" fairly howled the marquis, and he made a rush at Mackay.

The Californian straightened himself up and let the Frenchman have a good "left-hander" as he advanced.

The blow struck the marquis at the junction of the right arm with the body and knocked him off his feet.

Down upon the floor the Frenchman went, all in a heap.

The Russians made a movement as if they meditated coming to the assistance of the down-fallen man, but the Californian promptly shoved his hand into his pocket and allowed the butt of a pistol to appear; the Englishman too stepped forward to play the part of a peacemaker.

"Gentlemen, for heaven's sake I entreat you do not let us enter into a brawl like a lot of common, vulgar ruffians!" he exclaimed. "If you must quarrel, quarrel like gentlemen and settle the dispute in a gentlemanly manner. Remember too that you are in the house of a lady!"

By this time the Frenchman had regained his feet; he was fairly white with rage but he showed no disposition to attack the Californian; the prompt and easy manner in which the other had knocked him down was a warning, not to be lightly disregarded, that in a personal encounter he was no match for the Californian.

"You have insulted me, sir, in the grossest manner and I must have satisfaction!" the marquis cried.

"Oh yes, of course, being a gentleman of high degree it is extremely unpleasant for you to be detected cheating at cards just like a common sharper," Mackay exclaimed in a voice full of sarcasm.

"It is a mistake—I am a gentleman and would not dream of doing such a thing!" the Frenchman protested.

"Oh, come now! that is altogether too thin!" the Californian rejoined. "You were caught, dead to rights, and there isn't any possible way for you to get out of it!"

"You have dishonored me with a blow and you must give me satisfaction!" the marquis blustered.

"Well, sir, you have come to the right shop as far as that is concerned, and you will not have any better success in attempting to bluff me than you have had in playing poker. I am ready to give you all the satisfaction you desire."

"It is well," responded the Frenchman with great dignity. By this time he had succeeded in recovering his composure, realizing that in order to deal with such a man as his antagonist, he needed all his wits. "I am no fisticuff fighter, but a gentleman, and it is my custom to settle all such matters as this with the sword, but I presume you will not dare to meet me with that weapon," he added, with a sneer.

"Oh, will I not?" exclaimed the Californian immediately, in lofty scorn. "What kind of a man do you think I am that you imagine you can bluff me out of my boots at the first trial?"

"Then you do not object to swords?" the marquis inquired, hardly able to conceal the satisfaction which he felt.

"No, of course not! Swords will suit me all right, and it would be all the same if you had said harpoons or crowbars!" the young man exclaimed, with the true recklessness of the sons of the Pacific Slope.

"I am your man at any kind of game that you choose to name, and if I don't succeed in coming out first-best, then I will have no one to blame but myself."

"I am in the mood to have this matter settled immediately!" the Frenchman declared.

"So am I," the Californian replied at once. "The quicker we get at it the better, is my opinion!"

"There is a bright moon, and there must be plenty of quiet spots in the neighborhood where we can meet without danger of being disturbed by any one if we only had a pair of swords."

"I have a couple of pairs in the house which I shall be pleased to lend you," the cousin of the Red Princess, Golitzin, observed.

"Well, now, that is really providential!" the Californian exclaimed. "If this thing had been all arranged beforehand, it could not have happened better."

The others stole rapid glances at each other. Had the young man been shrewd enough to guess that he was the victim of a plot, or was it only a careless remark?

There was an awkward silence for a moment, broken by Golitzin's exclaiming:

"I will fetch the swords!" and then he hurried from the room.

"This proceeding is entirely irregular," the Englishman remarked. "But if you are both desirous of going on, I presume it is as well not to delay."

"My wounded honor cries aloud for satisfaction!" the marquis declared, with a great deal of dignity. "And the quicker the affair is settled the better I will be pleased."

"If the picnic is going to come off there isn't any sense in postponing it," the Californian observed.

At this moment the Russian returned with the swords.

They were neatly wrapped up in green cloth. Opening the parcel, he displayed the weapons, which were the usual "small swords," used by European duelists.

"These are good weapons," the Frenchman remarked, taking one and examining it with the air of a man who was a judge of that sort of thing.

The Russian offered one to the Californian, saying as he did so:

"Perhaps you would like to examine one, sir."

"Oh, no, that is all right," Mackay replied, in his careless way, waving the sword aside. "I will take your word for it that these toadstickers are the proper things for gentlemen to use."

The adventurers exchanged glances; they did not know what to make of the Californian.

Was this the bravado of a man who was not conscious of the danger that confronted him, or was the other so familiar with swords that he was able to detect at a glance that the weapons were extra good ones.

"If you are agreeable, gentlemen, we will go forth and seek for some quiet spot where this difference can be settled," Fitzherbert remarked.

"Proceed, sir, I am ready," responded the Frenchman.

"So am I!" Mackay exclaimed.

The party filed into the entry, procured their hats and Fitzherbert opened the door to allow the others to pass; after they had crossed the portal he started to follow, but was detained by a hand laid upon his arm.

It was the Red Princess, who, gliding noiselessly through the entry, sheltered herself behind the half-opened door, so as to be able to speak to the Englishman without attracting the attention of the others.

"Did I not tell you that this man was dangerous and warn you not to interfere with him?" she exclaimed, in hurried, anxious accents.

"Oh, De Neville will settle him now," Fitzherbert replied.

"Do not count upon that!" she retorted. "From my post of observation I both saw and heard all that passed. I tell you this man is a regular demon and when the marquis executed his *coup* with the cards his eyes fairly turned green. He detected the maneuver the moment it was performed, and then, when De Neville attacked him he stretched him upon the floor with as little trouble as though he had been a ten-year old boy instead of a full grown, powerful man."

"He took De Neville by surprise," the Englishman exclaimed. "And then the marquis is a Frenchman too and few men of his race know anything about boxing, but now the marquis will speedily settle him. He is an excellent swordsman, and when he gets the Californian before him sword in hand he will soon stretch him upon his back."

"Do not believe it!" the woman declared, vehemently. "The marquis will be lucky if he escapes from this affair with his life. I am satisfied that while you think you have been laying a trap for this man you are mistaken and have fallen into one that he has laid for you."

"Oh, no, you will see that the marquis will pink him in such a manner that the Californian will curse the hour that he ever dared to face him sword in hand," and then the Englishman hurried after the rest, while the Red Princess, with an angry gesture, closed the door.

"Oh, how these blind and willful men pull down destruction upon their heads!" she cried, as she turned to retrace her steps.

The rest of the party had halted at the gate to wait for Fitzherbert, having missed him, and as the Englishman hurried down the walk, two strangers came along the road, and when the party came out of the gate they confronted the new-comers.

"Hello, Mackay, old boy, is that you?" cried one of the strangers.

"Well, if it isn't," cried the other. "Who would have thought of meeting you here?"

The new-comers were well-dressed, muscular-looking men, with a certain air of firmness about them that impressed the conspirators extremely unfavorably.

"Yes, I am at the Branch, and have just run over here for a little fun, but am in for more than I bargained for when I started," the Californian answered. "But I am deuced glad to meet you, boys, for I need friends just now. Gentlemen," and he turned to the party he was

with, "allow me to introduce some friends of mine, Mr. Ben Smith, Amos Brown," and then he presented the others one by one.

The marquis and Fitzherbert exchanged glances. To their thinking this was a most unfortunate meeting.

"These gentlemen have come in the nick of time," the Californian remarked. "It is hardly right that I should have to ask any of you, who are all strangers to me, to act as my seconds in an affair of this sort, but these gentlemen, who are old pals of mine, can second me as well as any men that I could pick out in the wide, wide world."

And then the Californian briefly explained the situation to the new-comers.

"Certainly, of course; I shall be delighted to serve you," Mr. Smith exclaimed. "This is old business for me, and I shall feel right at home."

"Oh, yes, Tom, you can depend upon us," Mr. Brown declared. "You know us of old; we understand how to run an affair of this kind right up to the handle!"

"Let us go on; we are losing time," the marquis remarked, stiffly.

Then he and Fitzherbert linked arms and started; the two Russians, carrying the swords, came next, and the Californian, with his friends, brought up the rear.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE FIGHT.

THE two adventurers conversed in a low tone as they walked on. Being some fifteen or twenty feet in advance of the others, they were able to speak without danger of their conversation being overheard, so long as they were cautious how they spoke.

"What do you think of this accidental meeting with these two strangers?" the Englishman asked.

"Ah, but that is the point—is it accidental?" the marquis queried.

"It certainly seems to be, and yet the circumstance is extremely suspicious."

"It is very odd that these two men should happen to come along at this time—just when the Californian most needs the services of friends," the Frenchman remarked.

"Yes, it is extremely unfortunate, for it would be far better that there should be no witnesses to this affair."

"Yes, yes, no doubt about that."

"But I say, although this meeting with these two men does have a decidedly suspicious look, yet it does not seem possible that it is not accidental."

"Well, I am not so sure about that," the other replied, with a doubtful shake of the head.

"My dear fellow, carefully examine the circumstances of the case," the Englishman said. "If the meeting was not accidental then it must have been arranged beforehand."

"Very true!"

"But could that be possible? This man did not know that we were going to bring him over here to-night; he did not know that the Red Princess had taken a house at Pleasure Bay until we informed him, and then he knew nothing in regard to the location, for Pleasure Bay covers considerable territory."

"That is true too."

"Now if this meeting was arranged beforehand it follows that the Californian must have known all about the Red Princess being here, and the exact location of her house, so as to be able to post his friends."

"Yes, that is so," the marquis admitted, after reflecting for a few moments.

"Then too he must have been aware in advance that he was coming here or else he would not have warned them to be on hand."

"Well, he could not possibly have known that, for the trip was arranged on the spur of the moment, and after you went for the carriage we walked up the avenue together, and I will swear that he did not communicate with a soul, either openly or by any secret sign, for I had my eyes upon him and he could not have done so without my knowledge."

"Don't you see now how improbable it is that this meeting is not accidental?" Fitzherbert asked. "He must have known about this house—must have foreseen that he would be brought here by us—must have conjectured that a quarrel would arise, which would result in a hostile meeting, when he would need the assistance of friends."

"Oh, yes, the way you are figuring it out you make it clearly improbable."

"But I cannot arrange the thing otherwise," the Englishman remarked.

"Yes, you can! Now listen to my surmise," the marquis remarked, his face dark with thought.

"This Californian is a far shrewder fellow than we imagine. He has detected that we intend to fleece him and made arrangements to beat us at our own game. He understood that we were desperate, determined men, and that if we did not succeed in our design we would be apt to damage him, so he made arrangements with these two men to follow on his track wherever he went, so when we brought him here to-night the pair shadowed us."

"Oh, but this is so extremely improbable!"

the Englishman exclaimed. "You are making the fellow out to be a regular Vidocq, when, in reality, he is a reckless, heedless young man, full of egotism in regard to his own smartness."

The Frenchman meditated for a few moments over the matter.

"I believe you are right," he said, after a pause. "I am giving the man credit for being a great deal shrewder than he possibly can be; but that is the way with me; I am always discounting the future, as it were. Because this fellow had wit enough to detect that I was going to cheat I have made a great man out of him."

"So it seems to me, and when I come to consider all the circumstances of the case I cannot help coming to the conclusion that this Californian's meeting with his friends is accidental. But now the point for us to discuss is what effect the presence of these two will have on our plans."

"Well, that is well worth considering."

"It is your intention to give this fellow a pretty severe lesson, I presume?"

"Yes, I would kill the scoundrel, were I not afraid of the consequences."

"True, that must be thought of."

"This is not France, or even the Continent, you know," the marquis remarked. "These infernal, cold-blooded Americans do not recognize the duello."

"Not in the Northern States," the Englishman added. "In the South, and far West, though, two gentlemen can settle a quarrel by a personal encounter without danger of being called to an account if death happens to follow the hostile meeting."

"If there were only our friends present, I could kill the scoundrel and the matter would not get out," the marquis remarked. "But as these two strangers will be on hand, I suppose I will have to content myself with wounding the fellow so as to lay him up for awhile."

"But it is not always possible to arrange such a matter as one could wish," Fitzherbert remarked.

"That is true; with the best intention in the world only to wound the man, I may kill him," the marquis observed, speaking in the most flippant manner, as though the death of the Californian by his hands would sit lightly on his soul.

"And in that case you will probably have to fly."

"Oh, yes, but that matter can be easily arranged. The captain is so anxious for the Californian to be put out of the way, that he will not grudge me a good, round sum to put me on my feet again in some foreign country, and, as I have acquired a taste for new lands, I think I will try Brazil, or some other of the South American countries, which, I believe, will afford a fine field to men of genius, like myself."

By this time the party had reached a secluded spot near the water.

They had turned aside from the main road, and followed a little by-path—a cow-track to the meadows.

There was no house near, and it was plain that the fight could take place without danger of any one interfering to prevent it.

"Well, gentlemen, I think this will answer," the Englishman remarked, as the party came to a halt, and the members of it gazed around them.

"Oh, yes, this will do first-rate!" the Californian exclaimed.

"It is a beautiful spot for a little affair of this kind," the marquis remarked, with an approving nod.

"Now, gentlemen, although these proceedings are a little irregular, according to the strict letter of the code, I presume neither one of you object, as you are anxious to settle the matter as quickly as possible?" said Fitzherbert.

"I for one am quite satisfied!" the marquis hastened to exclaim. "I have been insulted—my person degraded by a blow—and only blood can wipe out the disgrace of such a stain, but I seek no favors; all I ask is a fair field."

"That is all I want!" the Californian cried. "A fair field and may the best man win!"

"You understand, gentlemen, that this meeting, although sanctioned by the rules which govern gentlemen in their intercourse with each other, is against the law, and, consequently, all here must pledge themselves to keep the affair perfectly secret, no matter how it may end."

"Certainly, of course, that is understood," Golitzin remarked. "You can depend upon the discretion of myself and friend."

"I can answer for my pals here!" the Californian answered. "They are from the far West, like myself, where little affairs of this sort are common, and they understand that when men go on a picnic of this kind here in the East, they are obliged to keep their mouths shut."

"I spoke about the matter so that it would be perfectly understood," Fitzherbert explained.

"Of course, that was all right," but we are up to the wrinkle, and whether I come out of this thing alive or dead you can depend upon the secrecy of my friends here," the Californian declared.

"Now, in regard to the rules of the fight," the Englishman observed.

"I must have blood to wipe away the stain upon my honor!" the Frenchman declared in an extremely theatrical way.

"I am ready to give the gentleman all the blood he wants—that is if he is skillful enough to be able to get it," the Californian remarked in an extremely sarcastic way.

This remark made the marquis swear under his breath, but he consoled himself with the thought that he would soon be facing the scoffer sword in hand, and he promised himself that he would give him a lesson he would not be apt to forget to his dying day.

"What I was trying to get at, gentlemen, was, is this fight to be to the death, or is it to stop upon the drawing of blood?" Fitzherbert remarked.

"It is a matter of perfect indifference to me," Mackay responded. "I am willing to fight until this gentleman's wounded honor is satisfied," and he nodded to the Frenchman, while a sarcastic smile played upon his face.

"And I, too, am equally agreeable," returned the marquis with stately politeness. "I am willing that the contest shall go on while this gentleman is able to stand up. When he is stretched, helpless upon the ground I will be content that the duel shall end."

"It is understood then that the fight is to continue until both of you are satisfied," the Englishman remarked.

"Yes," replied the marquis with a bow.

"That is the game we are to play," the Californian observed. "And if we keep on until both are satisfied neither one of us will complain after the thing is over that we didn't get enough."

"Prepare then, gentlemen!" Fitzherbert exclaimed.

The marquis removed his coat and vest and bound his handkerchief tightly around his waist, the Englishman assisting him, and then the pair, happening to glance at the Californian, saw that he had prepared himself in a similar manner.

"The fellow knows how to get ready for a contest," the Englishman observed.

"Yes, but still he may not know anything about handling a sword," the marquis replied.

Then Golitzin, perceiving that the duelists were ready, advanced and tendered the Californian his choice of the four swords.

"They appear to be all alike," Mackay remarked as he selected one of the weapons.

"They are as alike as two peas!" the Russian declared. "I would defy the most expert judge of swords that ever lived to pick out one of the weapons which differs in the slightest manner from its fellows."

"So I should judge," the Californian remarked, examining the sword with as much curiosity as if he had never seen such a weapon before.

Then Golitzin advanced to the marquis and tendered the swords to him.

The Frenchman selected one.

"I think you will have an easy task," the Russian observed to the marquis in a low tone. "From the way the man acts with the sword I do not think he ever had one in his hand before."

"Oh, there isn't any doubt in regard to the result," the Frenchman declared with an arrogant smile. "It is not to be expected that a man of my ability with the sword will be apt to meet an antagonist who will give me any trouble in a country like this where not one man out of a thousand ever takes a sword in his hand. You may rest assured that the moment I cross swords with the scoundrel I will make short work of him." And then the Frenchman executed a "parade" in the air with the steel, the effect of which was to cause an oath to escape from his lips.

"Ah, *Mon Dieu!*" he cried.

"What is the matter?" asked Fitzherbert.

"That infernal rascal!" the marquis exclaimed, making a frightful grimace.

"The Californian?" asked the Russian.

"Yes; you know when he struck and knocked me down?"

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed the Englishman and the Russian in a breath.

"He hit me here in the shoulder with his iron-like fist, and now my shoulder is lame. I did not notice it until I attempted to use the sword, but now I can feel it."

The Englishman was aghast at this discovery and all sorts of wild ideas crossed rapidly through his brain.

"Great heavens!" he cried, "can it be possible that the man struck you in that particular spot on purpose—could he conjecture that in case there was a hostile meeting that you would demand that the fight should be with swords, and his design in striking you in that particular spot was to lame you so that you would be placed at a disadvantage and could not wield your weapon?"

The marquis laughed sarcastically.

"Upon my word, Fitzherbert, you are allowing your imagination to completely run away with you!" the Frenchman declared.

"I thought I was bad enough awhile ago when I was investing this bragging rascal with all the attributes of a Vidocq, but you have gone far beyond me!"

"Yes, yes, I suppose the idea was a nonsensical one, but it came to me, and on the spur of the moment I put it into words."

"My arm is not lame enough to make any difference!" the marquis declared. "If I were about to meet a first-class swordsman—a fellow with a wrist of willow and an arm of steel, it would be different, but with this untutored barbarian, bah! I will run him through the body in ten seconds after we cross swords!"

"I am all ready whenever you are!" the Californian exclaimed at this point.

"You see the rascal is eager to feel the point of my steel, and it is not right to keep him waiting in suspense," the marquis remarked with a sardonic smile.

"Keep your eyes upon me and see how easily I will make an end of him!" was the Frenchman's vaunt as he advanced to meet his antagonist.

As the two came together in the center of the open space the Frenchman towered over his adversary, being fully a head taller, but the Californian was far better built, and a sporting prophet, used to judging of the men fitted for muscular feats, would have said that the Californian was a far better man in every respect than his opponent.

The Frenchman could not resist the old trick of the adventurer when he feels that he has his antagonist at his mercy—could not resist the temptation to utter a few taunts.

"Now then, I give you fair warning that I do not intend to have any mercy upon you," the marquis declared. "I am going to teach you a lesson which you should never forget."

"Are you quite certain that you will not get a lesson yourself before you get through?" the Californian inquired.

The shining blades were now opposed, glancing against each other like two silver snakes entwined.

"I will soon convince you as to who will receive the lesson and who will not," the marquis declared with a scowl and then he "disengaged" preparatory to a thrust.

This was the opportunity for which the Californian waited.

Exerting all the strength of his powerful arm he delivered a glancing blow, striking down the Frenchman's steel with his own. It was the famous disarming stroke of the German school.

Although taken completely by surprise yet the marquis was too good a swordsman to suffer his weapon to be stricken from his hand in this manner, and if it had not been that the powerful blow which the Californian had given him in the house—had lamed his arm much more than he imagined, the stroke would not have succeeded, for the marquis was really an extra good swordsman; but as it was, owing to his lame arm, his guard was beaten down and then, with a single thrust, the Californian drove his blade into the body of the Frenchman.

The marquis gave a convulsive groan, threw up his arms, and then, as the Californian withdrew his sword, fell forward on his face.

It was plain that the fight was ended.

Fitzherbert and the Russians ran to the assistance of the fallen man.

"You have killed him, I fear!" the Englishman cried.

"Oh, no, I think not," the Californian replied, as cool as a cucumber. "The sword has gone through his side, just under the arm. It was my game to wound him so that all the fight would be taken out of him, and yet not to endanger his life, and I think, when you come to examine him, that you will find I have succeeded in my design."

It was soon apparent that Mackay had spoken the truth; the wound was severe, and would certainly lay the Frenchman up for a month or so, but was not likely to be dangerous if proper care was given the man.

"Well, gentlemen, the performance is over, I presume?" the Californian remarked, with a polite bow to Fitzherbert and the Russian, who stood grouped about the fallen man gazing with wonder at the victor who had won such an easy triumph. I and my friends will walk back to Long Branch, as we don't mind a tramp in the moonlight. And when your friend recovers, if he wants more satisfaction, he knows where to come for it."

Then Mackay and his companions departed, leaving the others astounded at the ease with which the young man had triumphed over the veteran adventurer, who in his time had conquered some of the best swordsmen in Europe; but in this uncertain world, the race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE RED PRINCESS SPEAKS.

FITZHERBERT and the Russians gazed after the three until their figures were swallowed up in the gloom of the dusky night.

The Englishman was the first to break the silence.

"This man is a very demon!" he declared.

"Yes, as dangerous a fellow as I ever encountered!" Golitzin assented. "The idea that he should be able to finish the marquis so easily—a

man who has faced some of the best fighters in Europe and lived to boast of it."

"Yes, and conquer him, too, by a shallow trick of the fencing-school; but you could see from the way he broke down the guard of De Neville by the single powerful blow, that the fellow had a wrist of iron, as otherwise he could not have accomplished it."

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed the Russians in a breath, and then a groan from the wounded man attracted their attention.

"We must get him up to the house some way, and send for a doctor as soon as possible. We can account for the wound by saying that he was in liquor, and tried to commit suicide, attempting to die by his own sword, like an ancient Roman," the Englishman remarked.

"Hadn't we better go to the house and construct a litter upon which to carry him?" Golitzin suggested.

"Yes, that is a good idea, but hurry up, for we must get him to bed and stop the flow of blood as soon as possible," Fitzherbert remarked.

The Russians hurried away, and the Englishman sat down by the side of the wounded man.

The marquis had fainted after receiving his wound, but now his senses were returning, as the Englishman perceived.

He opened his eyes and gazed, vacantly, for a moment into the face of the Englishman, as though he did not comprehend what had occurred; then, all of a sudden, the truth flashed upon him.

"The scoundrel has wounded me—where is he?" De Neville cried, making an effort to rise, and the movement gave him such a twinge of pain that he groaned aloud.

Be quiet, marquis, and do not try to exert yourself. The fellow managed to give you a pretty severe wound and you must take matters calmly, or else the consequences may be serious. I have sent to the house for a litter, and as soon as it comes we will carry you to the dwelling and summon a doctor to dress your wound."

"The scoundrel! I will kill him for this!" the Frenchman muttered, faintly.

"We will have a bloody revenge; you can depend upon that," Fitzherbert declared.

The Russians soon returned with a hastily-constructed litter, upon which the wounded man was placed, and then he was conveyed to the cottage of the Red Princess, where he was put to bed and his wound dressed.

"Now I will drive over to Long Branch for a doctor; Golitzin had better accompany me and then I shall not have to return," the Englishman remarked.

"Very well," the Red Princess replied. "But was I not right in regard to this man? Would it not have been better if you had heeded my warning?" she asked.

"Yes, you were certainly right, but the way the matter was situated we were obliged to go on."

"I tell you that this man is more than a man!" the Red Princess exclaimed, excitedly. "I cannot understand it at all. I never felt so in regard to anybody before, but from the first moment I set eyes upon his face, with the cruel, pitiless gray-green eyes—the eyes of an animal, not of a human—I felt that he was dangerous."

"You were certainly right in the opinion, no matter whether you came by it through your judgment or jumped at it instinctively."

"It was my instinct not my judgment that gave the warning," the woman declared. "But now I hope you are satisfied, and that you will not attempt to trouble this man again."

"You will have to talk to the marquis in regard to that, and I do not think you will find it an easy task to convince him that he ought not to seek to be revenged upon the man who has wounded both his pride and person," the Englishman remarked.

"Oh, I shall not trouble myself to waste words upon him if I find that he is inclined to be obstinate about the matter!" the Red Princess exclaimed, disdainfully.

"De Neville has never been celebrated for his wisdom," she continued. "Look over his career in life and see what a failure he has made of it."

"He has always been rash and headstrong, full of overweening vanity, and it will be a wonder if it does not lead him to his death."

"It is truth that he has not made much of a success considering the opportunity he has had, and if it is true that this Californian is a sort of a demon, as you think, then I fear the marquis is doomed, for most certainly, just as soon as he is able, will he seek to be revenged."

"He must go to his doom, then, if he won't be warned!" exclaimed the Red Princess with the air of a tragedy queen. "But one thing is sure! He shall not drag me down with him! I will not take any part in any attack upon this man, nor will I be used as a lure, or decoy, to bring him into danger."

"You will get in trouble with the captain!" the Englishman warned.

"Do you think he will be foolish enough to attempt to measure strength with the man after he hears of this night's work?" she demanded.

"Oh, yes, he will argue that one swallow does

not make a summer, and because a single attack has failed, it does not follow that a second or a third attempt may not be successful."

"Yes, the argument is a good one but when such a man as this comes into the question all the specious pleading in the world will not make him any the less dangerous," the woman persisted.

"The captain is a pretty lucky fellow himself, you know," Fitzherbert remarked. "And he has a good opinion of his luck too, and I think you will find it difficult to make him believe that this Californian can be any more lucky than he is."

"Of course a willful man must have his own way," the Red Princess observed. "It is an old saying and a true one, but I am as certain as that I am under this roof to-night that if the captain attempts to measure strength with this stranger he will most bitterly regret it in the end."

The Englishman had an excellent opinion of the woman's judgment and the emphatic manner in which she spoke made him doubtful in his mind.

"Well, of course, it will be as the captain says," he remarked. "If he considers it wise to attack the man, why, it will be done."

"I will have no part in it though!" the Red Princess declared, firmly.

A look of surprise appeared on the face of the other.

"But if the captain commands it?" he urged.

"No matter whether the captain commands it or not!" the woman replied, firmly.

"If you stick to that you may get into trouble, for the captain is very strict about exacting obedience."

"Trouble! what do I care for trouble!" cried the Red Princess with a mild laugh. "Have I not now had trouble enough to drive me into a madhouse? And suppose I disobey the captain's orders—what can he do—can he do more than kill?"

"No, I should say not," Fitzherbert replied, amazed at the manner of the other.

"And to the woman who cares not whether she lives or dies do you suppose death has any terrors?" she asked, her voice full of cold contempt.

"Of course not."

"Such a woman am I! I have come to that stage when life is beginning to be a burden to me, and yet, do you know, I think from encountering the power of this green-eyed demon just as if I was in love with life and desired to cling to it with all my power. That is a strange contradiction now, isn't it?"

The Englishman admitted that it was.

"I am a riddle even to myself," the Red Princess remarked, musingly.

"One thing though is certain!" she declared, abruptly rousing herself from the dreamy stupor into which she was falling. "I would rather brave the captain's anger than risk the displeasure of this stranger who has terrified me as no man in this world ever terrified me before."

"It is very strange," the Englishman remarked, and it was no wonder that he thought so, for he had never known the woman to shrink from any danger before.

"You can tell the captain what I have said in regard to the matter," the Red Princess added.

"Oh, no, I do not want to do that—I do not want to make any trouble."

"But it is better that he should know, for if he is not satisfied with the failure of this plot to entrap this Californian he will set to work to plan others, and it is more than likely that he may count upon my aid, and that, under the circumstances I cannot give."

"Well, I suppose then that it would be better that the captain should know how you feel about the matter."

"Oh, yes, then he will understand that he cannot count upon me. Tell him that I am ready to obey his commands and carry out his orders to the best of my ability in anything which does not concern this stranger, but when it comes to him, the man has plunged my soul in mortal terror, and I dare not make a move against him."

"Very well, I will explain the matter, and now I will be off."

The Russian was ready, so the two got into the carriage and drove away.

On the road to Long Branch the pair discussed the strange and unexpected defeat of the marquis, and the Englishman mentioned how the Red Princess felt in regard to the Californian.

"I do not blame her," Golitzin remarked. "I agree with her, the man is a human devil—if there can be such a thing. And she is right too about his gray eyes which sometimes change to green."

"I was watching the man when he made his successful coup, broke down De Neville's guard and ran him through the body, and as he lunged with the steel, and the marquis's blood spurted forth, his eyes were green, and seemed to gleam with fire just as the eyes of a cat do at night."

"I have seen a great many sword encounters in my time but I never saw an expert sword-

man, as the marquis undoubtedly is, so easily defeated."

"And mark you, Fitzherbert, the man really spared the life of the marquis, for the moment he broke De Neville's guard down he held the Frenchman's life at his mercy, and he could just as well run him directly through the body, inflicting a mortal wound, as to prick him under the shoulder as he did."

"Yes, that is true, for the fellow was perfectly cool and collected—knew what he was about and told where he had wounded his man before any examination was made."

"It is certainly a strange affair!" the Russian declared. "And I can tell you that it is not wonderful that the Red Princess does not want to have anything to do with the fellow. I feel that way myself, and I hope the captain will not hatch up any scheme against him which will press me into service. I am not like the Red Princess, desperate and reckless whether I live or die, so I would have to obey orders, but I tell you, Fitzherbert, I should go into the affair most unwillingly."

"Well, I must admit that after what I have seen of him I, myself am not anxious to measure wits or strength with him," the Englishman declared.

CHAPTER XXX.

TELLING THE TALE.

It was a little after midnight when the pair arrived at the hotel, but Sanches had not gone to rest, for he was anxious to learn how the scheme had progressed, and so had decided to remain up until one or two o'clock, expecting that he would hear some news by that time.

And the moment that the Englishman and the Russian entered his apartment he knew by the look on their faces, as well as by the fact that the marquis was absent, that something had gone wrong.

He listened attentively while Fitzherbert related what had occurred, and his brow grew dark when he heard how completely the plot had failed.

"By all the fiends!" he cried, when the Englishman finished his story. "This man is even more dangerous than I thought him!"

"Yes, if you could have witnessed the scene—witnessed his breaking through De Neville's guard, as though the Frenchman was a novice who never had a sword in his hand before in his life, you would be more astounded than you can possibly be by the bare recital!" Fitzherbert declared.

"It was the finest and quickest piece of sword play that my eyes ever witnessed!" the Russian declared.

"He detected the marquis the moment he attempted to arrange the cards?" Sanches questioned, musingly.

"On the instant."

"And then struck him down?"

"Felled him as the ox falls before the butcher!" the Englishman declared. "And when the marquis came to take his sword in hand he found that his arm was lame from the blow, and, no doubt, it was because his arm was lame that the Californian was able to break through his guard so easily."

"No doubt, no doubt!" the Cuban declared.

"And the thought came to me that the blow was given in that particular spot for the purpose of laming the arm, the fellow being shrewd enough to anticipate that a sword fight would follow, but De Neville thought the idea was absurd."

"It was not; you were right and he was wrong. The duel with swords was anticipated, and the blow was given for the express purpose of laming the arm of the marquis!" the Cuban declared.

"Well, that was my idea, although I am aware that it seems to be far-fetched."

"Oh, no, this man is a dangerous one; he is possessed of rare cunning, and I do not believe the man knows what fear is; then, too, he is perfectly cool and collected no matter how great the danger. Where I have erred is in underrating the man."

"He certainly is the coolest hand I ever encountered, and I agree with you that he is as brave as it is possible for a man to be," Fitzherbert remarked.

"I think I am something of a swordsman myself," the Russian observed, "but I would not be willing to face that man with a sword for a fortune! He had the marquis at his mercy. He could just as well killed him as not."

"And as you came out of the house, on your way to the fighting place, the Californian accidentally encountered two friends," the Cuban observed, with a peculiar smile.

"He certainly met the men, but whether the meeting was accidental or not is a question," the Englishman replied.

"Oh, in my mind there is no doubt whatever about the matter!" Sanches exclaimed. "The meeting was not accidental. The two men had been warned to be on hand there, and to make their appearance when they saw the Californian come from the house in your company."

"Yes, but how was it possible for the fellow to make all these arrangements beforehand?"

Fitzherbert asked, with a puzzled air. "How was it possible for him to guess that we would try any game where the assistance of his friends would be desirable?"

"Because the man is a genius—a really wonderful fellow, possessed of uncommon shrewdness, and he had wit enough to detect that you and the marquis intended to make him a victim, and so he made such arrangements that it was not possible for you to catch him in a trap. He anticipated that, sooner or later, you would attempt to put him in a hole, and he had his companions shadow him."

"That is the only possible explanation of the mystery," the Englishman remarked.

"But if these men were shadowing the Californian, how comes it that he was caught in the first trap?" the Russian asked.

"I can only explain that by inferring that at that time the men were not on guard," Sanches replied. "It was, probably, his being caught in that trap which suggested the idea of putting shadows on his track to him."

"Yes, that is a reasonable explanation," the Englishman observed, thoughtfully.

And the Russian nodded, as much as to say he agreed also.

Then Fitzherbert related the particulars of the conversation that he had had with the Red Princess about the matter.

The Cuban listened, a dark frown upon his brow.

"Bah! the woman is getting childish!" he exclaimed, contemptuously, when the recital was ended. "This is not the age of superstition—human demons no longer exist, and because the man happens to possess a pair of ugly gray-green eyes, that is no reason for supposing that he is more than mortal."

"He is simply an uncommonly shrewd fellow, and, so far, he has beaten us in this struggle because he has not only shown more talent than we have, but has also been favored by fortune."

"Well, that is a more reasonable explanation than to give way to a superstitious belief that the man is more than mortal," the Englishman observed.

"Oh, yes, in the old time when a man had extra good luck, it was the fashion to believe that he had made a compact with the devil, and when he succeeded in his undertakings, it was the common report that it was through the aid which Satan gave him."

"We know better in this enlightened age, and now when a man succeeds in forging ahead of his fellows, the world throws up its cap and cries out in admiration of the man's extraordinary ability, when, half the time, it is simply dumb luck which has made the man."

"Yes, yes, that is true enough!" the Englishman assented. "Some people pretend to think that there is no such thing as luck, but I have seen too many cases where luck, and luck alone, made a man either rich or poor, to doubt that luck has a deal more to do with a man's success in this world than the ability that he may possess."

"No doubt of it," the Cuban declared. "Now in this case this Californian has, unquestionably, been lucky, but that is no reason why he should always continue to be so, and if we keep on attacking him, and are careful to plan to the best of our ability, recognizing that we are contending with a man of uncommon smartness, and who seems to be extremely lucky, there is no doubt in my mind that we will succeed in tripping him up sooner or later."

The others nodded; this statement appeared to be reasonable to them.

"In regard to the Red Princess, she is a nervous, flighty woman, who cannot be depended upon in an emergency," the Cuban remarked. "She was not always so. There was a time when she combined the cunning of a fox with the courage of a lion, but that day has gone by. A severe illness, which brought her so near to the gates of death that it seemed almost certain that she would enter, sapped her strength of mind, and though when she recovered in bodily health she was as well as ever, her mind has never been the same, so her wild ideas on the subject of this Californian do not have the slightest weight with me. I shall not call on her to take a part in any attack I may make upon him. In her present state of mind she would not be in a condition to render much assistance."

"Have you thought over any plan of attack?" the Englishman asked. "I know that your mind usually works quickly, and it does not take you long to come to a conclusion."

"Oh, yes, I have thought of a scheme," the Cuban replied.

His hearers were all attention immediately.

"This man is uncommonly able and uncommonly lucky," Sanches remarked, reflectively. "It was my belief at first that he was a police spy, and although I did not believe the fellow was after me, or had any idea of the game I was trying to play down here, yet, going on general principles, I considered that I ought to attack and get him out of the way if possible."

"That was advisable, of course," the Englishman commented.

"I failed in my attack, as you did in your lit-

the scheme, both of which were carefully planned and ought to have succeeded."

"Yes, yes," the Russian cried, while Fitzherbert nodded.

"Now I am beginning to doubt if I was correct in my suspicion that he was a police spy," the Cuban observed. "From what has transpired I am beginning to believe that the fellow is nothing but an adventurer, and that his business here at Long Branch is the same as that we came upon—to secure all the plunder he can lay his hands upon, and these two friends of his, who made their appearance so unexpectedly, are confederates who are keeping in the background, but are ready to lend him aid whenever it is desirable."

"Yes, I believe you are right," the Englishman observed. "There does not seem to be anything of the detective or police spy about him."

"Oh, yes, he is an adventurer," the Russian declared. "I do not think there is any doubt about that, but of a different type to the ones we are accustomed to. We know the adventurers of the Old World; this man is of the New."

"You have hit upon the truth, I think," Sanches observed.

"Now we have tried two ingenious and complex schemes and both have been most utter and complete failures," he continued. "My new plan has the merit of simplicity although it is as old as the hills. I am going to put a couple of our thugs on the track of the man and have him assaulted and killed on the first convenient opportunity."

"Well, I should not be surprised if the scheme succeeded," Fitzherbert remarked, after reflecting upon the matter for a moment.

"Simple means often succeed where complex ones fail," the Russian said.

"We can try it at all events; if it does not succeed we can try something else," Sanches observed. "One thing is certain, we must get rid of the man somehow, for I have a presentiment that if we do not, all our schemes will come to naught."

The others agreed with this declaration and the interview came to an end.

Although Sanches affected to treat the matter lightly yet he was much angered at the escape of the Californian and lay awake half the night reflecting upon the matter.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE DETECTIVE.

THE old Jew doctor, Lenicas Zimmer, and his misshapen servant, the hunchback mulatto, Monkey Bill, sat in the dingy shop of the former.

The shades of night had fallen upon the great city; all without was gloom, for the street was badly lighted and the old shop was but little better off as far as lights were concerned than the street, for only a small coal-oil lamp burned upon the counter.

The doctor had just come in and seated himself in his old arm-chair.

"Anybody been in, Monkey?" he asked.

"Detective Irving!"

The old Jew started in alarm.

"What is dat you say—Detective Irving?"

"Yes, sah!"

"He has been der house in?"

"You're right, sah!"

"He wants to see me?"

"Dat's w'at he sed."

"Mine gootness! v'at ish der matter!" and the old Jew took out his handkerchief and began to wipe away the perspiration which the unexpected announcement had caused to start forth on his brow.

"V'at did der detective want mit me? I am not doing any crooked work."

"I don't know, sah, he didn't say," the hunchback replied. "He only axed whar you were, an' when I tole him dat you was out, he sed he would drop in ag'in."

"V'at can der matter be?" the old Jew exclaimed, his wrinkled face more wrinkled than ever now by the lines of care. "I like not dat Detective Irving! He is one of der quiet men, and when he comes after a mans he means business, every time!"

"Dat is so!" the mulatto declared. "I would rather hab any man on de force arter me dan Irving."

"I cannot understand v'at he can want. All der crooked work dot has been done lately has been so well covered up dat it ish not possible dat anybody could have smelt it oudt."

"Here he comes now, sah," warned the hunchback.

The stalwart form of the detective darkened the doorway.

Detective Irving the reader has encountered before, for he is one of the gentlemen who accidentally met the Californian at Pleasure Bay and was introduced by him to the others as Mr. Ben Smith.

"Good-evening, doctor, how do you find yourself to-night?" the detective asked in the most cheerful and friendly manner as he entered.

"Oh, I am pretty well for an old man; I cannot complain," the doctor answered, rising and greeting the new-comer with as much cordi-

ality as though he was the dearest friend he had in the world.

"Well, I am glad to hear that."

"Monkey, fetch a chair for Mister Irving!"

The mulatto hastened to comply.

"Vill you hafe a glass of vine, Mister Irving? I hafe some goot stuff—German vine dot vill varm der cockles of der heart!" and the doctor, rubbing his withered palms briskly together, grinned in the face of the detective.

"Well, I will take a chair for I want to talk to you on a little matter of business, but no wine thank you; I am just as much obliged to you all the same though," and the detective took a seat as he spoke.

The old Jew also sat down, glancing at the other in a nervous way as he did so.

"Dere ish nothing wrong, Mister Irving, I hope?" the doctor remarked. "I am an honest mans, Mister Irving, und since I got oudt of der trouble five years ago I hafe been very careful."

"To cover up your tracks so securely that you could not get caught again, eh?" and then the detective laughed at his joke.

"He, he, he!" laughed the old Jew, "you ish a funny man, Mister Irving, und you vill hafe your joke! But, so help me Moses! I hafe been keeping as straight ash a string ever since!" the old man protested.

"Yes, you just got off by the skin of your teeth that time, and I suppose it has been a lesson to you," the detective observed.

"Yesh, yesh, it vas a lesson."

"You had a mighty narrow shave!" the other remarked with a weighty shake of the head. "If the evidence had been a little stronger you would have gone up to Sing Sing for five or ten years as sure as you're born!"

"Yesh, yesh, appearances were against me but I vas innocent!" the Jew protested. "I vas in bad company—dot vas all. I had nothing to do mit der affair!"

"Oho! tell that to somebody that don't know you as well as I do!" the detective exclaimed. "You must not attempt to pull the wool over my eyes, for I know you too well."

The old Jew chuckled, pretending to be greatly amused at the declaration of the other, although in his heart he was angry enough to kill the plain-spoken officer.

"He, he, he!" laughed the Jew. "Dot ish goot; yesh, you vill always hafe your leetle joke, Mister Irving!"

"Oh, yes, I am one of the greatest jokers that you ever saw," the detective observed, sarcastically.

"Yesh, yesh, everybody dot knows you knows that dot ish a fact."

"So you are keeping all straight now?"

"Yesh, yesh, it is ash I shust told you—as straight as der string."

"Well, I am glad of that, and if I were you I would be mighty careful what I did, for the old man at Headquarters has got it in for you on account of your slipping through his fingers the last time, and I do not believe that there is a man in this city whom he would rather snap the bracelets on than a party about your size."

"Oh, yesh, dot ish right! I understand you, Mister Irving, now you ish joking again; you want to frighten der wits out of me; but, so help me Moses! I am valking shust like a chalk line now."

"That is good! The scare you got is strong enough to last you a lifetime, eh?"

"Oh, yesh, you can shust bet on dot!"

"Do you have much practice now?" the detective asked in a careless way, but the acute old Jew immediately suspected that the officer was preparing some trap for him.

"Oh, well, not mcoch," he answered. "I am an old mans, I am not v'at I used to be. I cannot expect to hold mine practice mid so many young doctors trying to get mine patients away from me."

"Let me see! You speak four or five languages, don't you?" the detective asked in a reflective way.

"Vell, I cannot say that I speak dem very good," the Jew answered, disparagingly.

"But you can understand what is said to you, and you can make yourself understood," persisted the officer.

"Vell, I don't know; it ish so long since I hafe spoke any'ting but English and German dot I don't know about it," the old man replied, still on the lookout for a trap.

"Oh, what is the matter with you now? What are you trying to give me?" the detective demanded. "You know very well that you speak quite a number of languages as fluently as a native. What do you want to deny the truth for?"

"Oh, vell, I s'pose I hafe v'ot you might call a smattering," the old man admitted.

"On that account you manage to pick up a good many foreign patients—men who cannot speak the English language, and who are glad to find a doctor who can talk to them in their own tongue."

"Oh, yesh, yesh, I s'pose I do hafe a few," the Jew admitted, secretly wondering what on earth the detective was trying to get at, for that the officer had some deep purpose in view

in this questioning he was certain, for Irving was not a man to waste his time in idle talk.

"Let me see, you speak Mexican, don't you?"

"Oh, no, dere is no such thing as a Mexican language, you know," the old Jew replied in an evasive way.

"Oh, yes, I understand all about that! Don't you try to play any game on me, you know," the detective exclaimed with a laugh. "I understand that in Mexico they speak Spanish, but I have been told by Spaniards that the Mexicans don't really speak pure Spanish, for the language has become corrupted with a lot of Indian words, so that the Mexican-Spanish is a sort of dialect, and a Spaniard not accustomed to it would be bothered to comprehend a great many words, just as a well-educated man in this country, who had never heard any slang wouldn't know what was meant if some rascal using the thieves' argot told him to 'sherry his nibs.'"

"Oh, vell, I do not know," replied the Jew shrugging his shoulders.

On general principles it was a rule with the Jew to always deny everything.

"I say, Zimmer, you old fox, you are the champion liar!" the detective declared, with blunt, straightforwardness.

"Oh, mine gootness, no!" cried the Jew, lifting both hands high in the air in protest.

"Yes, yes, you are, but you cannot fool me for a cent!" the detective exclaimed. "Here you are trying to make out that you don't know anything about Mexican-Spanish, when I know very well that you do, for you lived in the City of Mexico for two years, and practiced medicine there."

Upon the face of the old man appeared an expression of profound amazement, and again he threw up his hands in astonishment.

"Oh, mine gootness, Mister Irving, v'at a man you are!" he declared. "It ish my belief dot you know every'ting!"

"Yesh, yesh, now dot you recall it to my memory, I t'ink I did live in der City of Mexico, but it was so long ago dot I had forgotten all about it."

"I reckon, then, that if a man came in and talked Mexican-Spanish, you would be able to make out what he said?"

"Vell, I don't know," the Jew replied, shaking his head with an air of profound regret. "I am getting old—mine head ish not v'at it used to be, and it vos so long ago when I vas in der City of Mexico, dot I don't know as I could remember dot language."

"But you get along all right with this young fellow that you have got here, don't you?" the detective observed. "You don't have any trouble to understand him, and to make him understand you?"

The old man gave a start and looked at the officer as if he thought the other had suddenly taken leave of his senses.

"Young mans dot I get here?" he cried.

"Yes, this Mexican."

"V'at Mexican?"

"Why, you know, the young fellow who can't speak a word of English, and who came to you to have a bullet taken out of his shoulder."

"A bullet out of der shoulder?"

"Oh, yes, it is all right; you see that I know all about it," the detective remarked in an extremely friendly way. "Where have you got him—up-stairs?"

"Mine gootness! Mister Irving, somebody has been playing a joke on you if dey told you dot I hafe a young mans here. Dere is not a soul in der house but mineself and Monkey Bill! D'ot ish der truth, so help me Moses!"

An incredulous look appeared on the face of the detective.

"Oh, come now, I reckon you are trying to play a game upon me!"

"As I am a living man, it is der truth!" the old Jew protested. "If you do not believe me, come along mid me and search der house! If you find any man here, young or old, Mexican, English, or any odder countryman, I will agree to eat him, and gootness knows I am no cannibal!"

"Oh, as to searching the house, I understand all about that," the detective remarked, slowly.

"You cannot fool me with any steer of that kind. I understand that a sly fox like yourself must have plenty of hiding-places in an old rookery like this—where a man could be easily stowed away, and to make a proper search of the house, would require about a dozen men."

"Send for dem, Mister Irving!" the old man exclaimed. "You hafe plenty of men! All you hafe to do is to hold up your hand und fifty men vill come! Make all der search you like, und with as many men as you please, you vill find no mans here, young or old, but Monkey Bill und mineself."

The detective surveyed the face of the old man with his keen eyes for a few moments as though he would read his very soul.

The Jew was extremely nervous under the scrutiny, but bore it pretty well, for he was a man of shifty ways, who seldom looked anybody in the face if he could help it.

"Well, old man, I believe that you are giving it to me straight this time," the detective said at last, after quite a long pause.

"If I am not speaking der truth, I vish I may die!" the old Jew declared, elevating both hands toward Heaven in a very dramatic manner.

"Well, the little trap I laid for you didn't work!" and the detective laid back in his chair and laughed as if he considered the matter to be an extremely good joke.

"Ah, my dear Mister Irving, do you think dot ish vas shust right to lay a trap for an old friend like mineself?" exclaimed the Jew in a wheedling way.

"Oh, well, all is fair in war, you know?" the detective replied.

"Yesh, yesh, dot ish true enough, but it ish not war between you und me, Mister Irving!" the Jew exclaimed, rubbing his hands together and smiling blandly upon the officer.

"Gootness knows, I would do anyt'ing in der world for a mans like yourself," he protested.

"Is that so?" the officer exclaimed, in a mocking tone.

"Yesh, yesh, shust you try me once, und see if it ish not shust as I say!" the old Jew declared. "If I knew dot dere vas a mans about dot you wanted, I would run fit to break my neck for to catch him for you!"

"Well, I am glad to hear it, and maybe you will run across this party that I am after, although I hardly think that it is possible now. But I will post you so you will know him."

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE MAN WHO IS WANTED.

"Yesh, yesh, dot ish right!" the old Jew declared immediately. "You shust tell me all about der t'ing, und I vill keep my eyes open."

"There is a man wanted for murder!" the detective explained.

"For murder! Mine gootness! der game is a big one, then?"

"Yes, it isn't any common, petty rascal, but a big gun."

"Oh, yesh, a murder ish a big crime."

"The affair happened in an Italian restaurant up-town, which is also much frequented by Spanish-speaking people, and all the parties connected with the tragedy are, as far as we can find out, Mexicans."

"Yesh, yesh, those Mexicans are a hard lot of men," the old Jew declared. "They are as ready to use der knife as any men in the vide world. When they quarrel, they do not hit each other mit dere fists, but cut mit der knives und slash away."

"There was a party of Mexicans drinking and playing cards in the back room of the restaurant; they had been there the better part of the evening, and about twelve o'clock the most of the party were well under the influence of liquor; then a quarrel arose."

"Ah, yesh, dot ish natural," and the old Jew wagged his head. "When der vine is in, de vits are out."

"One of the party had been a heavy winner, in fact, he had managed to get hold of about all the money that there was in the party, and this run of luck led the others to suspect that he had been cheating them, particularly as he was a stranger whom none of the rest knew, although he was a Mexican like themselves."

"Ah, yesh, I see, a black sheep who had rung himself in on der gang shust so as to get away mit der monish."

"That is the view that some of the gamblers took of the matter, and they accused him openly of being a blackleg and a cheat."

"Dem ish pretty bad names," Zimmer observed.

"Yes, and the man resented the accusation; a fight immediately took place, the supposed gambler got a bullet in his shoulder, but with his knife he laid out four of the party; one man is already dead, and two more are not expected to live."

"Mine gootness! dot mans vas a regular devil!" exclaimed the old doctor in horror.

"Yes, he was evidently a terror," the detective remarked. "After laying out his men he made his escape by a rear door, and after he got out into the street disappeared about as utterly as though he had sunk into the earth."

"Dot vas strange!"

"Yes, all the best detectives in the town have been on the case, and not the slightest clew in regard to the fellow have they been able to get."

"Ah, yesh, but it ish only a question of time; your detectives are splendid men, and you will be sure to hunt him down," the old Jew remarked, fawningly.

"Now you are giving me a little taffy, eh?" the detective remarked, with a grin.

"Oh, no, so help me Moses! I believe that dot ish so!" the other declared.

"Of course it looks as if the fellow was not so much to blame for using his knife, for as there was five to one against him, if they sailed in to do him up, he would be justified in protecting himself."

"Mine gootness! yesh, dot vas so!"

"But the others swear that when they accused him of being a professional gambler, and told him to his teeth that he had forced himself into their company for the express purpose of winning their money, he drew his knife and swore he would kill the whole party, and, as

only one of them happened to be armed, he had things his own way, for after the man with the pistol got one shot at him, putting a bullet in his left shoulder, not wounding him sufficiently to stop him, he laid him out with a single slash of the knife, and then went in to clean out the rest of the party."

"Mine gracious! v'at a desperado!"

"There is a reward of a thousand dollars offered for his capture by the brother of one of the killed men, and the boys from Headquarters are hustling around pretty lively, anxious, you know, to collar that thousand."

"Mister Irving, do you know dot I would be willing to bet ash mooch as ten dollars dot you will be der mans to gets der money!" the Jew declared.

"Well, I don't know about that, but one thing is sure, I am going to make a lively try for it, and don't you forget it!"

"I vill not, und you can bet yer boots on dot!" the old Jew declared, gravely.

"Here is the man's description," and the detective drew a written paper from the large pocketbook, which he carried in the breast pocket of his coat.

"This description is not accurate, you know, but it is the best we could get," the detective remarked. "It is a funny thing that in all cases of this kind after the man has disappeared the people who saw him differ materially as to how he looked."

"Yesh, yesh, many men, many mines!"

The detective read the description aloud.

"About the medium size, more under than over it, and rather slightly built, a little effeminate looking in the face, swarthy skin, eyes supposed to be dark but there is a doubt on this point, may be light. Slight mustache and imperial, hair long and curly, black in color, worn down over the ears. Well dressed in a light suit; is not able to speak any English."

"Mine gootness! dot mans ought to be recognized anywhere!" the old Jew declared after the detective finished the description.

"Yes, but you must remember that if you were to go around looking for a man who answers exactly to this description the chances are big that you would get badly left," the detective observed, as he folded the paper and returned it to his pocketbook.

"How ish dot?" demanded the Jew.

"Why the very first thing the man would do would be to make some alteration in his personal appearance, so that he would be unlike the description which he knows would be given of him."

"Yesh, yesh, dot ish so. Ah, mine gootness, Mister Irving, you are up to all der tricks!"

"That is our own little biz!" the other replied. "Now then, the question comes up what changes in his personal appearance will the fellow be apt to make?"

The doctor shook his head as though the conundrum was too much for him.

"In the first place he would be apt to take off his mustache and imperial so as to appear with a clean face; then he would cut his hair short and put on a different suit of clothes. He had a light suit on at the time the trouble occurred; he would be apt to put on dark, so, you see, the man I am looking for don't resemble this description in some important particulars."

"Yesh, yesh, dat ish true."

"But the scent I am on is all outside of the description," the officer explained. "The man had a bullet in his shoulder; how serious the wound is no one knows, but the chances are that he is not very badly hurt; still it will not be very pleasant for him to go around with a piece of lead in his flesh and, of course, he will have it taken out as soon as possible."

"Yesh, yesh, for until he has a doctor examine der wound he cannot tell but what it may turn out to be a bad one."

"Exactly! well, every hospital in the city has been notified in regard to the case, and no man with a bullet in his shoulder can show his nose in any of these institutions without the news being at once sent to Headquarters."

"Then every doctor in the city has been warned, and I, personally, took upon myself the task of coming to see you about the matter. You see I happened to remember that you had practiced in Mexico, and was familiar with the language, so I had a notion that it might be possible that the man might be directed to come to you if he needed anyt'ing in your line by some mutual acquaintance of his and yours in the City of Mexico."

"Oh, no, it ish years since I vas there," the old Jew declared, with a shake of the head. "It ish not likely that any one there remembers me now."

"Well, it was a forlorn hope, of course," the detective admitted. "I hardly expected to have the good luck to nab him, but then once in a while a man turns up trumps in just such a queer way."

"Oh, yesh, dot vas true."

"The chances are big to my thinking that the fellow has got out of the city, although word was sent to guard every point as soon as Headquarters got hold of the affair; still he had time to escape before that if he acted promptly."

"If he vas smart he vent at once."

"Yes, but as a rule they ain't smart!" the detective declared as he rose to his feet.

"Well, just you keep your eyes open, and if you should happen to meet the fellow send me word as quickly as possible, and if I nab him through your aid I will give you a hundred for your trouble."

"Oh, dot vas all right! I would do it anyway und not charge you a cent!" the old Jew declared.

"The hundred will not be bad for you to take, though; ta, ta!" and the detective went forth into the night.

"Mine gootness! mine heart vas in mine mouth when he comes in!" the old doctor exclaimed, with a sigh of relief. "I am more afraid of dot mans, Irving, than all der rest put together."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A STRANGER.

MONKEY BILL discreetly retired after placing a chair for the detective, but now, hearing the door close behind the officer, he re-entered the apartment.

"W'at de he want, boss—did he come for to make any trubble?" inquired the mulatto, anxiously.

"Oh, no, it ish not possible for any of der detective rascals to make troubles for me!" the old Jew declared. "I am too careful now how I carries on my business."

"By golly, I am glad of it!" Monkey Bill declared. "But I tell yer, boss, I am afeard of dat man, Irving, I am!"

"Yesh, he is der smartest man of der gang, but I vill take care dot none of dems gets a hold on me."

At this point a couple of patients came in to consult the doctor, and they were followed by three more, which took up his time for an hour, and then the old Jew was left alone, Monkey Bill having received permission to go out.

Ten minutes after the last patient departed, another visitor entered, a stranger to the doctor, who surveyed him closely.

The new-comer was a young man of twenty-three or four with a rather peculiar face.

His complexion was swarthy, being as dark as that of an Italian; and yet he had rather lightish eyes, they being gray in color.

He was smoothly shaven, not a trace of hair on his face, and this tended to give him an effeminate look.

His hair was black, curly and cut quite short, and the young man was attired in a dark suit rather the worse for wear.

No sooner had the old Jew made a careful inspection of the stranger than the thought flashed upon him that the man in many respects agreed with the description that the detective had read; that is, agreed with the amended description which Irving had given when he had suggested the changes which the fugitive would probably make to throw the bloodhounds off the track.

"Is this Doctor Zimmer?" asked the stranger in Spanish, but speaking with such an accent that the old Jew at once jumped to the conclusion that he was a Mexican.

"Aha, I vill bet ten tollars dot dis ish der man!" he muttered, and then he nodded to the stranger and said aloud in Spanish:

"Yesh, yesh, Doctor Zimmer, dot ish my name, but mine frient vill you rot speak English? for I do not speak der Spanish as vell as I might."

The young man shook his head.

"I cannot speak English," he replied.

The old Jew chuckled in his sleeve.

"It is der mans, sure enough!" he murmured.

"Now then v'at shall I do? If I send for der detective I vill make a hundred tollars, but can I not make as much as dot, if not more, out of dis mans, and I hates to put monish in der pocket of any of dem rascal detectives too."

Then, assuming a welcoming smile, he beamed on the stranger.

"Ah, vell, if you cannot speak der English we must get along in Spanish, and I hope I vill be able to make you comprehend v'at I say."

"Oh, yes, you speak correctly enough. I can understand every word you say; no one to hear you talk would believe that you had not spoken Spanish all your life."

"Ah, mine gootness! you flatter me now!" and the doctor rose and made an elaborate bow.

"Excuse me! I hafe not offered you a chair; pray be seated!" And then he placed a chair for the young man, and, as he was about to sit, the old doctor, in an extremely awkward manner, stumbled against him, striking the stranger on the left shoulder.

"Ah, caramba! take care! you murder me!" exclaimed the young man, wincing with pain, and as he leaned back in the chair his breath came hard and thick as though he was about to faint.

"Ah, ten thousand pardons!" cried the old Jew. "Let me fetch you a glass of water!"

There was a pitcher and a glass on the counter so the water was soon procured.

The young man drained the glass at a swallow.

"I feel better now," he remarked. "It is nothing; I am used to these sudden turns."

"Ah, yesh, it is bad!" the doctor remarked

sympathetically, but, in reality, he was chuckling in his sleeve, for he knew now that his guess was correct; this was the man who was "wanted" by the police, for he was suffering from a wound in the left shoulder.

"Now, my dear sir, v'at can I do for you?"

My name is Juan Las Cruces; I am a Mexican by birth and have been recommended to your kind offices by some friends of yours who are also friends of mine."

An expression of astonishment appeared on the face of the doctor.

"Ah, mine goot sir, is there not some mistake?" he exclaimed. "I hafe no friends in Mexico dot I know of!"

"I did not say that these friends who recommended me to you were in Mexico."

"Ah, yesh, I see!" exclaimed the doctor, now completely puzzled. "I believe dot you did not, but I took it for granted dot they were."

"Oh, no."

"Where are dey den?"

"Some uv them are in New York, or were, a few weeks ago. I have not seen the parties for a month, so I cannot locate them exactly now."

"Yesh, yesh, I see, but I must confess I do not understand it at all," the old Jew said, unable to see into this strange affair.

"I bear a message to you, and the parties from whom I come said that when you received it you would aid me by every means in your power."

"Yesh, yesh, this is all very strange!" the old Jew exclaimed. "You had better gife me der message."

The stranger extended his right hand to the Jew, the palm downward. The Jew had taken a chair and was within reach of his visitor.

"Have the kindness to separate the little finger from the next one to it—look on the inside of the little finger and tell me what you see there."

Wondering at this strange injunction the old doctor obeyed, and then a cry of amazement escaped from his lips.

"Der brand of der Invisible Hand!" he exclaimed.

And it was true; on the inside of the little finger, just beyond its junction with the palm, a spot where it would not be apt to be noticed unless some one was in search of it, was a tiny vermilion-colored hand.

"Is the message satisfactory?" the Mexican asked, with a smile.

"Oh, yesh, yesh; but I am so astonished! It was der last thing I expected to see!" the old Jew declared.

"This is a world of surprises, and our brotherhood are so scattered around that one never knows when the brand of the Invisible Hand may be brought to sight."

"Yesh, dot ish true."

"This sign entitles me to all the aid and protection that you are able to give?" the Mexican inquired.

"Oh, yesh, anyt'ing I can do for you I will be glad to do."

"I am very thankful to hear it, for I am in a sad plight now."

"Yesh, dot ish true."

"Why, how can you possibly know?" the young man exclaimed, in surprise.

The old Jew laughed.

"Ah, my tear young fr'ent, I know a great deal more about you than you hafe any ideoa of!"

"You astonish me."

"I can tell you almost everyt'ing dot has happened to you in der last four-und-twenty hours!"

"You can?"

"Yesh; but first, had I not better take dot ball out of your shoulder, for it must be very uncomfortable?"

"I see that you *do* know something about me," the other remarked. "But I cannot for the life of me understand how you gained the knowledge."

"Never mind dot now; shall I not take out der ball?"

"It is out," the young man replied. "I extracted it myself with my penknife, for it was not in deep; but I made an ugly job of it, and the wound is very painful."

"Ah, yesh, of course."

"If you know about my wound, I suppose you also know that I am in trouble, and I do not exactly see how I am going to get out."

The old Jew shook his head.

"Mine gootness! you are in a peck of troubles, und I do not see either how you are going to get out. Der police are on your track; two of der men dot you hurt in der fight last night are dead, und there is a reward of a t'ousand dollars offered for you."

The face of the young man grew dark.

"Well, I am in for it and no mistake!" he exclaimed. "I can guess how you got your information now though; the police have been here in search of me?"

"Yesh, dot ish true, one of der best detectives on der force; he was here not an hour ago, und sat there in dot chair shust where you sit now."

"I am done for then, I suppose!" the Mexican exclaimed, moodily. "But, I say, how on earth

did the detective come to suspect that I would come here to you?"

"Oh, he did not suspect; it was shust chance. Every hospital—every doctor in der city was visited. They thought you would go to some one to have the ball extracted, und so they would be able to nab you."

"Did the detective give you my description?"

"Oh, yesh."

"And you recognized me immediately from it?"

"Yesh, my tear fr'ent!"

"Little good has it done me then to shave and cut my hair!" the Mexican exclaimed, in deep disgust. "I thought I had made such a change in my personal appearance that it would not be possible for any one to recognize me."

"Ah, it is a hard matter for a mans to so alter himself dot he vill not be known," the old doctor declared, with a shake of the head.

"I suppose every avenue of escape is guarded?"

"I t'ink so."

"It is possible even that I may have been tracked by spies as I came to this house!"

"Yesh, dot ish so, these rascal detectives are everywhere!"

"If I am taken the rope is my doom, certain! How can I escape?"

The old Jew shook his grizzled noddle. The Mexican's head sunk upon his breast, and it was plain that he felt as if the shadows of death were already on his brows, and yet he was young to die.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE JEW IS ASTONISHED.

FOR fully five minutes the Mexican remained motionless with his head bowed upon his breast, the old Jew watching him.

Then, abruptly, he looked up, and hope sparkled again in his eyes.

"I have a plan!" he exclaimed.

"Of escape?"

"Yes!"

"Mine gootness! I cannot see a chance for you!" the doctor declared.

"With your help I can work it!"

"Vell, I vill do v'at I can for you, but you must not bring me into danger if you can help it!" the doctor said, anxiously.

"Oh, no; it will get both of us out of the scrape, for if I am tracked here and arrested the police may try to make trouble for you."

"As like as not—these rascal detectives!"

"You are a doctor and reports say that you possess great skill!"

"Oh, I know a thing or two!" the old Jew declared, nodding his head, sagely.

"Can you not give me a dose that will produce the appearance of death?"

"Eh? v'at ish dot?"

"Something that will lay me out, stark and still. Then you can arrange to have my body placed somewhere where the detectives can find it. I will write a note, stating that rather than face death upon the scaffold I have chosen to die by my own hand, and in my pocket, along with the note, I will have a vial with some poison in the bottom of it."

"Yesh, yesh; I see!" the old man exclaimed, with a cunning laugh.

"When I am found, apparently dead, the note and the bottle of poison will convince all that I have put an end to my existence rather than face a trial for murder."

"Ah, yesh, of course."

"Then after the coroner's verdict is given, you can claim my body, take it to some secure place, and bring me back to life again."

"Yesh, yesh, dot might be done, but it will cost much monish," the old Jew declared.

"I have a thousand dollars here; will that be enough?" and the Mexican drew a big roll of bills from his pocket.

The eyes of the old Jew glistened at the sight of the money, and then he cast an anxious glance at the door.

"Ah, mine gootness! we hafe been very foolish to sit here and talk right by der side of der door."

"But the curtains are down."

"Yesh, yesh, but dey are old, they may be holes in them, and some of der detectives may pop in at any moment."

"Come mit me!" and the old man jumped to his feet. "I will take you to a place where all der detectives in der country will not find you, and then we will talk der matter over mitout danger of being disturbed."

The doctor turned the key in the lock, and then, by means of the secret passage constructed in the old-fashioned chimney, as described in one of the early chapters of our tale, he conducted the Mexican to the second cellar, where the boxes with their previous contents had been carried.

The doctor had provided himself with a lighted lantern, which he hung to a hook in the ceiling when the pair arrived in the cellar.

"There, now, sit down und we can talk der matter over," the doctor said, pushing a chair to the other.

"The thing can be arranged?"

"Yesh."

"And a thousand dollars will pay you for your trouble?"

"Vell, it ish worth a goot deal of money."

"A thousand is all I have at present, but if it is not enough I will pay you more after I come out of the trance."

"Ah, well, you are one of der Invisible Hand band, und I vill not drive a hard bargain mit you," the doctor announced. "Der thousand will do."

"I have heard that this thing has been done, and the idea flashed upon me that as there did not seem to be any way for me to escape from this trap that I am in, I might try the dosing business."

"There ish not two men in der world who can fix der drugs to do der business besides mine-self," the doctor declared.

"But how about the danger?"

"Oh, there is none to speak of."

"No danger that, after the drugs are taken and the trance comes on, it may not be possible to restore animation again?"

"No, no!" declared the old Jew in the most positive manner. "My tear young frient, let me tell you somet'ings!" and the old doctor waved his skinny fore-finger, impressively, in the air. "In this very room I worked der t'ing—I brought back to life two peoples, a man und a woman, both of whom I helped to cheat der law mid my drugs."

"Yes, I have heard whispers in regard to that job, but I hardly believed it. Two members of the Invisible Hand band, I believe?"

"Yesh, yesh!"

"They were caught so that there was no escape for them apparently, but your drugs found a way."

"Dot ish der truth, and der captain of der band was one of der men."

"And the woman was a great friend of his."

"Yesh, yesh, she was one of der big-bugs!" the old Jew assented with a chuckle.

"All the world t'inks dot both of dem are dead—der bodies were shipped to their frients in England, you understands, but there was some little hocus-pocus played und the bodies came down here where I soon put der life back into them again."

"By all the saints, doctor, you are a wonderful man!" the Mexican exclaimed in tones that expressed deep admiration.

"If I had not been so fond of der rum there is no doctor in the world who could compare with me!" the old man boasted.

"And you managed these affairs so nicely too that the police never got on your track."

"Police! bah! I care not a snap of my fingers for der police!" the old Jew declared. "There is only one man I fear, dot Irving; some time ago he came within an ace of catching me."

"I tell you what it is, my good fr'ent, if I do this job for you, and pulls you safe out of your trouble, you ought to do something for me."

"All right! I will!"

"You are bandy mit der knife"—and the old Jew sunk his voice almost to a whisper.

"Oh, yes, few men can wield a knife better than myself!" the Mexican boasted.

"Can you not find a chance to gife dot Irving a taste of der steel?" the doctor asked.

"Oh, yes, it can be done."

"I will count out to you a hundred tollers if you will do dot job for me."

"That is a bargain; give us your hands upon it!" And the Mexican extended both hands toward the old Jew.

Eagerly the doctor put out his hands to satisfy the compact, and then, all of a sudden, there were two sharp snaps, and the old Jew, to his utter amazement, found his wrists adorned with a pair of handcuffs.

The adroit manner in which the Mexican had slipped the "bracelets" on was as pretty a piece of work as any trick of the sleight-of-hand men.

In utter astonishment the old Jew stared at the "ornaments" upon his wrists, and then at the young man.

"V'at does this mean? w'at foolishness is this?" he cried.

"It means, my dear Doctor Zimmer, that you have been trapped in the most complete and scientific manner!" the other replied, in English, which he spoke without the slightest bit of an accent.

For a moment the old Jew seemed like one paralyzed, then he sprung to his feet, and raised his manacled hands on high as though he meditated springing upon the man who had thus answered him.

"Don't try anything of that kind!" warned the young man, who, as the reader has doubtless guessed long ere this, was our old friend, the Californian.

"Don't try any foolishness of that kind or it will cost you dearly!"

And as he spoke—to give emphasis as it were to his words, the Californian drew a little loaded club from his pocket, one of the ugly little weapons which our English cousins call a "life-preserver."

"If you try any nonsense, you know, I shall be obliged to give you a few taps with this, which will be apt to knock a little sense into your head, if any instrument of the kind can do it."

The old Jew sunk down again in his chair, cowed and trembling.

"What ish der meaning of this, and who are you?" he cried.

"I am a detective—too new a hand at the business to have won a name as yet, but I think that if you call me The Wolf, that appellation will fit me as well as any that can be coined," the other replied.

"Like the wolf I am tireless on a trail when once I scent blood; like the wolf I don't know the meaning of the word mercy, but pull my prey down the moment I get a chance."

"Und I am in a trap dat you hafe laid for me?"

"You are. I take a wonderful amount of interest in these two cases that you speak of—this man and woman who by your aid managed to escape from the grasp of the law. I think I know the parties to whom you referred. The man was called Leander Brakespear—not his right name, of course, for the captain of the Invisible Hand band doubtless has a dozen different aliases. The woman was Alberta Darlington, and now I want you to tell me all you know in regard to the two."

"I will not speak!" the doctor shouted. "No court can compel me to speak!"

"Oh, I am not going to take you before any other court than the one you are now in. You are on trial here and I am both judge and jury. Don't think for a moment that there is the slightest chance for you to escape. Monkey Bill is arrested, and by this time Irving and his men are in possession of your premises up-stairs. But that has nothing to do with you; you will stay here with me until you speak or else 'until famine stings you.' Don't make any mistake. I'm The Wolf, and as merciless as any wild beast that you can find on the face of the globe!"

"If I speak—if I tells you everyt'ing, will you let me go?" cried the Jew, wild with terror.

"Yes, that is a bargain!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE ASSAULT.

AFTER the night when the Californian won such an easy triumph over the Marquis De Neville, the Cuban, Sanches, was careful not to be seen conversing with the Englishman.

It was his game not to allow the "Man-from-Frisco" to suspect that he was on intimate terms with Fitzherbert, for he felt sure that the Californian was satisfied as to the character of the two, and he was anxious that his suspicions should not be roused in regard to himself.

It was necessary, for the success of the plot that he had formed, that he should be posted in regard to the Californian's movements.

He had summoned MacNabb and Red Murphy, two desperate ruffians upon whom he knew he could rely, and these worthies had their instructions in regard to what they should do when a proper opportunity arrived.

The Cuban did not make the mistake of having the ruffians attempt to "shadow" the Californian, for he was satisfied that the man would discover that he was being watched if any such thing was tried, and if his suspicions were once roused then he would be on his guard, and if the Californian had an idea that danger threatened, Sanches was satisfied that he could not be got at.

The two ruffians were ordered to frequent a low saloon at the upper end of the town, where a tough gang were usually to be found, and they were instructed to assume the appearance of stablemen out of a job and looking for one.

In this guise they could lounge in the saloon and neighborhood without exciting any suspicion, as the place was much frequented by the stablemen of the Monmouth Racing Park.

Having the ruffians thus within call the Cuban was ready to take advantage of any occasion that might arise.

Six days passed without anything occurring, but on the afternoon of the seventh the Cuban made a sign to the Englishman that he wished to speak with him, and, in a convenient retired place, an interview took place between them both.

"At last I think I will be able to get a chance at him," the Cuban announced.

"Well, I am glad of that," Fitzherbert declared. "I was beginning to think that the opportunity would never arrive."

"After lunch to-day, while I was smoking a cigar in the office, I overheard a conversation between the Californian and old Thompson. Thompson, you know, has a high opinion of the fellow, and I am satisfied that the Californian has done his best to cultivate the acquaintance of Thompson, thinking, no doubt that a good word from him would come in handy some day to help along his suit with the heiress."

"Oh, yes, the fellow is smart enough to seize upon every advantage," the Englishman observed. "Any one with half an eye can see that he is after the girl, and if you do not get him out of the way I think I should be more inclined to bet upon him than you, for I have noticed during the last few days that Miss Green seems to be anxious to have the fellow dangling around her about all the time."

"Yes, I have noticed that," the Cuban said,

a frown appearing upon his swarthy face. "While I have no reason to complain in regard to her treatment of myself, yet she certainly has changed in her behavior toward him, and, as you say, she seems to take pleasure in being with him and they are almost constantly together."

"Yes, I have caught them conversing in retired nooks, just like a couple of engaged lovers," Fitzherbert.

"Well, I do not think that it has gone as far as that, but I am afraid that an engagement is likely to take place at any moment. But to this conversation that I overheard. Thompson and the Californian are going to the city together this afternoon as both have business there this evening, and they have arranged to meet at Thompson's house on Ninth street near Washington Park where they are to pass the night."

"Thompson, it seems, has a house there which he rents out, reserving a couple of rooms for himself, where he keeps bachelor's hall, when he is in the city. The family who hired the house are now in the country for the summer, so the two men will have the house to themselves."

"Yes, I see."

"I have the number, and as the talkative old fool took the trouble to give the Californian a full description of the house—the location of the rooms and all particulars, I am as familiar with the premises as if I had been an inmate."

"It is a good thing for men in our line to run across these talkative fellows sometimes," Fitzherbert observed with a chuckle.

"Yes, they certainly help business along," the Cuban rejoined. "Now the two are to meet at the Metropolitan Hotel on Broadway at eleven o'clock—both of them having business to attend to which they think will keep them until that hour—and then they are to go to the house, where they will pass the night."

"Just like old Thompson: he saves a hotel bill by this maneuver."

"Yes, that is his idea, of course. Now it will not be a difficult thing for our men to get into that house at some time in the night, prior to the arrival of the two."

"Oh, yes, that job will be easy enough, unless the fastenings are extra good."

"They are not, for Thompson spoke about the family who now occupy the house complaining in regard to the locks, which they declared are old-fashioned, and he has promised to provide new ones."

"Then, too, there is a basement door under the front stoop—it is a high-stoop house—so that our men will have cover while they are engaged in forcing the lock."

"Why, to use the slang, it will be a regular 'pudding' for our men to get into such a house as that!" the Englishman declared.

"Yes, our fellows can get in easily enough; then they can secrete themselves somewhere in the house, and when the Californian is wrapped in slumber's chain they can put him in such a condition that he will not trouble anybody hereafter."

And dark was the look upon the face of the Cuban as he uttered the words.

"The thing is just beautiful, my dearboy!" Fitzherbert declared. "And I do not see how it can possibly fail to work."

"Well, it looks to me as if we have got a sure thing this time," Sanches observed, thoughtfully.

"Oh, we have, undoubtedly! There is not a thing about the matter to excite the suspicions of the most timid man, and our fellows will have a clear field for their work."

"And the beauty of the thing too is that no suspicious will be excited that there is anything out of the common about the matter," the Cuban remarked.

"That is true."

"It will appear as if some burglars, knowing the house to be unoccupied, broke into it for the purpose of plunder. They encountered the Californian and he was killed to prevent him from giving an alarm."

"Yes, yes, of course, quite a natural proceeding under the circumstances."

"Our men will have ample time to get away, and not a trace will they leave behind for the police to work upon."

"Ah, yes, it will be another one of those mysterious crimes which make the big city tremble to its very center."

"It will not be possible for the shrewdest detective to guess that the Californian has fallen a victim to private vengeance."

"Of course! What is there about the affair to suggest such a thing?"

"Nothing whatever!" the Cuban declared, confidently.

"How about old Thompson?"

"He will not be troubled. He is to sleep in a back room up-stairs, while the Californian occupies the front one. There is a large closet between the two, with a passageway from one room into the other. Two doors, you see, which can be closed, so it will not be possible for the killing of the Californian to be heard by Thompson in the back room."

"Not unless he is allowed to make a fight for his life," Fitzherbert observed, thoughtfully.

"And I presume, you will take measures so that there will not be any danger of anything of that kind occurring."

"Oh, the job will be done in a workman-like style of course," the Cuban replied, discussing the matter with the utmost coolness as though it was a mere every-day affair. "I do not think that two better workmen than Red Murphy and Rodney MacNabb are to be found in the world. They have both been abroad you know, and neither in England, France or on the Continent did they find men who could crack a crib in a more scientific manner. You can depend upon it that they will not make any mistakes."

The conversation ended at this point.

That afternoon the Californian and the jolly old drygoods man, Thompson, took the train for New York.

At the ferry on the New York side they separated, each one going about his business.

At ten minutes past eleven that night the two met in the Metropolitan Hotel on Broadway, took a glass of ale together and then departed for the house of Thompson which they entered some ten or fifteen minutes later.

Everything was just as Thompson had left it, and there wasn't anything about the house to excite the suspicion that aught was wrong.

Now turn we the wheels of Old Father Time's chariot around.

The time is five in the afternoon, on the day following the night when Thompson and the Californian had entered the house of the former.

The Cuban and Fitzherbert are sitting on the piazza of the hotel in company.

As the Californian was absent, it matters not if they were seen together.

"It is about time for the afternoon papers to get here," Sanches observed.

"Yes, and do you know that I am deuced anxious about this matter," the Englishman remarked.

"Oh, everything is all right!"

"Yes, but we haven't heard a word."

"Well, no news is good news, you know."

"I am not so sure of that; it is not always so."

"Neither Thompson nor the Californian have returned?"

"No."

"And they were to have been back this afternoon. Doesn't that look as if our scheme had worked all right?"

"Yes, but there wasn't a word about the affair in any of the morning papers," the Englishman urged.

"I did not expect to see anything; there was not time. In all probability the killing would not be discovered until this morning when Thompson came to get up."

"Yes, that is true."

At this moment the newsboys came yelling down the avenue.

"Hyer ye ar"—New York papers—extra—awful murder!" was the burden of the cries.

"What did I tell you?" the Cuban exclaimed, with a quiet smile.

Calling one of the boys, they bought a copy of each journal that he had, and then fell to work to read the account of the awful tragedy.

To condense the account—news of this kind the average reporter always makes the most of—the statement ran that on the preceding evening Mr. George P. Thompson, "the well-known dry-goods man," had invited a California gentleman, one Thomas Mackay, of San Francisco, to spend the night with him at his bachelor quarters, and in the morning Mr. Thompson was horrified to discover that the house had been entered by burglars during the night, who had undoubtedly disturbed Mr. Mackay in their search for plunder, and, upon his attempting to interfere with them, he had been stabbed to the heart, and was dead, weltering in his blood, when Mr. Thompson went to call him in the morning.

Then followed a lot of rigmarole about suppositions and theories, closing with the statement that although no suspicion attached itself to Mr. Thompson, yet, under the circumstances, the superintendent of police had asked him to remain at Headquarters for a few days until the police investigated certain clues upon which they were working.

The Cuban laughed.

"It is the same old story—the authorities have clues and they expect to make important discoveries in a few hours," Sanches remarked.

"Yes, but do you notice that they are going to hold on to Thompson?" the Englishman asked. "No suspicion is attached to him, but the police are not going to let him out of their sight for a while."

"That is where they are wise, for if they don't discover the burglars, the chances are big that they will wind up by charging that he committed the murder himself."

"I should not be at all surprised!" the Cuban declared. "They have made blunders just as big as that before. But now we can breathe freely, for it is good-by to the Californian."

"Yes, this simple scheme succeeded where the complex ones failed."

"That very often happens."

"Now you stand a chance to win the heiress."
 "More than a chance—a certainty! I will have her, and that speedily. All the arrangements are made, and I will take advantage of Thompson's absence to push the matter through."
 "Ah, you are taking time by the forelock!"
 "Yes, I made up my mind to settle the matter with a grand coup," the Cuban remarked. "I managed to bring the Red Princess and Miss Katherine together to-day, and the heiress has gone riding with the Red Princess. She is to dine at her house; I am also invited, and I am to bring her back to the hotel this evening."

"A very pretty arrangement."
 "Yes, it affords me an opportunity to carry out my plot. I did intend to carry the girl off to the old house in the Pines, but I have concluded that it will be better to have the marriage take place at the house of the Red Princess, where we can have plenty of witnesses, who, if the girl declares hereafter that there was foul play, can swear that there was not."

"Yes, yes, that is wise."
 "At the dinner there will be you, I, the Red Princess, the heiress, the Russians, and the parson. I have Slippery Jack now at the house."
 "Be careful to keep him sober until the knot is tied," Fitzherbert cautioned.

"That will be attended to. During the dinner the girl can be easily drugged, and the wedding can take place immediately, and after the knot is tied I will have Satan's own luck if I do not succeed in getting hold of the money."

"My dear boy, as far as I can see, you are as sure of it as if you had the money in your fist now!" the Englishman declared.

"No, not quite so sure as that, but if the thing goes through all right, and there is nothing that can stop it as far as I can see, I will get the ducats!"

These worldly-minded plotters provided carefully against man's interference, but they thought not of the Hand of Heaven, which seldom forsakes the orphan.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE BLOW IS STRUCK.

It was a gay dinner-party that sat down to the luxuriously furnished table at the Red Princess's cottage a little after six that evening, and a magnificent repast had been provided.

There was the Red Princess herself at the head of the table, Miss Katherine on her right hand, the post of honor, by her side the Cuban, who had conducted her to the table.

On the left of the Red Princess, a tall, rather portly man, with a young-old face, who wore the sober black of the minister.

This was Slippery Jack Heatherwood, an English divine of unquestioned talents, but addicted to such vices that it was impossible for him to keep a pulpit.

But no one to look at the man would have believed that he was one of the biggest scamps that had ever left his country for his country's good, for he had such a plausible way with him that he often gulled sharp, shrewd business men.

Further down the table sat Fitzherbert and the two Russians.

It was a merry party, for these adventurers, men who live by their wits, are obliged to be accomplished and agreeable people; if they were not, they wouldn't get on at all.

And the deference they paid to Katherine, together with their delicate flattery, fairly turned the girl's head.

She was treated as though she was a very queen, and the rest only her subjects and slaves.

Her beauty was toasted, her wit and learning praised; the moment she opened her mouth to speak, every one bent forward to listen.

If she had been a very paragon of woman-kind, the guests could not have made more of her.

Was it a wonder that the girl should become fairly intoxicated with delight?

And then, too, to add to her excitement, it was an elaborate course dinner, and a different wine served with each course.

The girl was not used to drinking much wine, and she begged to be excused, but the rest were so kind, so anxious to take a glass of wine with her.

"You need only take a thimbleful, dear," the Red Princess declared.

And so Katherine, persuaded by these specious flatterers, drank far more wine than was good for her, and when the coffee was brought on, which was not until the dusky mantle of night had begun to fall over land and sea, she was in such a state, that it only needed a few drops of the potent drug which the Red Princess secretly poured into the coffee of the heiress to make her sleepy and neglectful of what was going on.

She leaned over toward the Cuban, almost unconscious of what she did, and he immediately put his arm around her waist and kissed her lips.

She, half-conscious, endeavored to draw away, but he held her firmly.

"Oh, you are lovers!" the Red Princess cried in wild glee. "Well, why not be married? There is no time like the present. Come, parson, go on with the wedding!"

"Yes, yes, a wedding!" cried the rest in glee.

"All right, anything to oblige!" and Slippery Jack rose to his feet.

The Cuban followed his example, pulling the girl up with him, and resting her head on his shoulder. But for his strong arm around her waist, she could not have kept on her feet.

"Proceed!" commanded Sanches, a mild note of triumph ringing out in his voice.

"Will you take this woman to be your wedded wife?" the minister began.

"I will!" the Cuban answered, firmly.

And as he spoke the rest of the adventurers rubbed their hands and chuckled gleefully.

Their leader was about to grab a stake worth a million of dollars, and they knew a good share of the spoils would come to them.

"Will you take this man to be your wedded husband?" the minister continued, a little uncertain in his speech on account of the wine he had drank.

"Oh!" muttered the unconscious girl; the Cuban had given her a violent pinch, which produced the exclamation.

"Hold on! I forbid the banns!" cried a clear voice, which rung through the room like the note of a trumpet.

A cry of amazement went up from all.

There, in the doorway, stood the man whom the adventurers supposed to be dead, Thomas Mackay, the Californian, and behind him in the passage was a group of men who displayed revolvers in their hands, and it needed no prophet to tell the adventurers that these strangers were detectives.

The Cuban released his grasp of the girl, and she sunk to the floor, and then he made a motion as though to draw a weapon, but the Californian had his revolver out, and "covered" the other in an instant.

"Don't try that, or I will have to cheat the hangman of a job!" he cautioned, sternly. "You are in a trap, no chance of escape, for the house is surrounded!"

"Of what am I accused?" cried Sanches, defiantly.

"Of half a dozen crimes; first and foremost you are an escaped prisoner, for you are Leander Brakespear, and this Red Princess here is Alberta Darlington. You cheated justice once by the aid of a drug, but you will not get a second chance. I have hunted you down through all the devious windings of the lanes of crime, and as I have told you who you are, perhaps it is only fair that you should know who I am. It was I that brought you to the bar of justice before: Hilda Serene, the actress detective, as you were once pleased to term me."

It was indeed the famous police spy, the woman who was about as much man as she was woman, for when she was in masculine garb no one would ever dream that she was not what she appeared.

Our tale is told.

The ruffians who had gone to murder the Californian had been nicely trapped, and then the false report of the murder had enabled another trap to secure the leaders.

Not one of the rascals escaped conviction, and one and all were sent to the State Prison.

It was a narrow escape for the heiress, and she declares she will never more put faith in man. The discovery that the dashing Californian was a woman was fully as great a blow to her as the revelation that the Cuban was a rascal.

And now, reader, farewell—no! not farewell, adieu, as the French say, which means we shall soon meet again, for I have as strange a tale to tell as ever yet have I told. It is of the adventures of the daring Hilda Serene amid the wild scenes of Wyoming Territory, the land of the rustling cowboys, not one of whom can boast a more dauntless heart than that which beats within the breast of the Actress Detective.

THE END.

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